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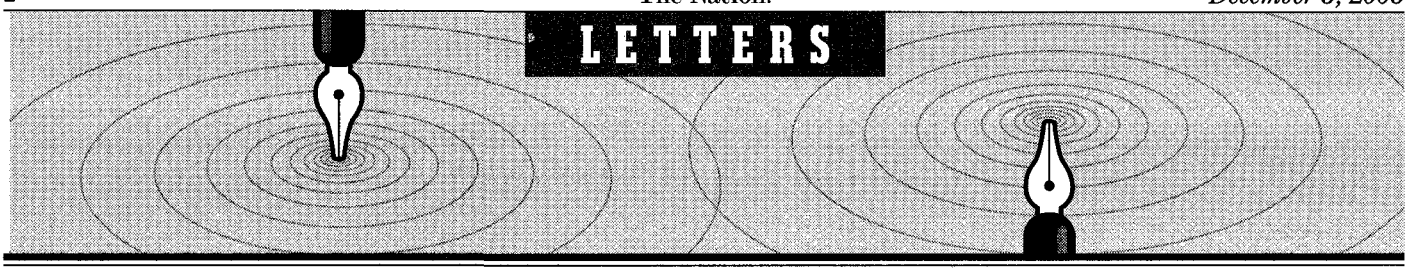

CHRISOPH NIEMANN

THE MAORI STILL FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

Somerville, Mass.

■ Anatol Lieven ["Frontier Injustice," Oct. 31] paints a totally different view of the Maori from that of many New Zealand historians (Ranganui Walker, *Struggle Without End*; Alan Ward, *Unsettled History*; Claudia Orange, *Illustrated History of Waitangi Treaty*; Michael King, *Being Pakeha Now*).

The colonial government did not honor the Waitangi Treaty of 1840. The treaty allowed the *pakeha* (white settlers) use of the land in return for helping the Maori develop economically. But that didn't happen. Instead the Maori had to go to war for almost thirty years to protect themselves. The colonial government pointed its guns at the Maori rather than protecting them, as Lieven claims, from English settlers. When the Maori organized and named Te Wherowhero their king in 1858, the government seized more land from them.

With hardly any fertile land left, the Maori were in an impoverished state by the 1930s. Many sought jobs in urban areas where the white population was. Their educated children have continued their ancestors' fight to make the *pakeha* honor the Treaty of Waitangi. The road to where the Maori are today was not as smooth as Lieven painted it. It is true that the Maori are "a powerful, growing...section of New Zealand society." But this is due not to British benevolence but to the fighting spirit of the Maori people for justice. MADGE KHO

LIEVEN REPLIES

Washington, DC

■ I certainly wouldn't suggest that the treatment of the Maori was just or generous—far from it. It was, however, vastly more so than the treatment of the Cherokee and the other "civilized tribes"—and this is demonstrated by the relative positions of the indigenous peoples of New Zealand and of the American South today. ANATOL LIEVEN

THE STONES SPEAK THEIR NAMES

Berlin

■ I recently had the same experience here in Berlin that Arthur Danto had in Cologne ["Mute Point," Oct. 17]. Walking in my neighborhood, I noticed two 10x10 cm brass plaques embedded in the cobblestone sidewalk in front of Landauer Str. 3, engraved with the information that Paul and Minna Grünfeld had lived there and that they were deported and murdered by the Nazis in 1941. Interested to learn more, I Googled their names and quickly found the locations of about forty more memorial plaques in my area and a link to www.stolpersteine.com, the website for *Stolpersteine* ("stumbling blocks"). I learned that this admirable project was begun by artist Günter Demnig in 1996 and that he has so far placed some 5,500 plaques in ninety-seven German municipalities. The sites are self-selected; current residents can memorialize their victimized predecessors for 95 euros.

Danto is right that names speak volumes, as Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial has eloquently demonstrated. As the *Stolpersteine* website asserts, "If the name is forgotten, so is the person." *Stolpersteine* is decentralized, locally funded, continually expanding and is not limited to Jewish victims—additional points of contrast to Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, the stark visual, physical and visceral vocabulary of which still owes much to his original collaborator, Richard Serra. It's also a legible retort to Jochen Gerz's *Invisible Monument* in Saarbrücken, in which the names of German-Jewish cemeteries are inscribed where they can't be read, on the underside of the castle square's cobblestones. Unfortunately, though, while I now know quite a bit about *Stolpersteine* and can make these comparisons to other memorials, I still don't know anything more about the Grünfelds. PETER CHAMETZKY

St. Petersburg, Fla.

■ Among the items Arthur Danto describes as "drenched in symbolism" associated with the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, he neglected to mention that the slabs are covered with an anti-grafitti substance made by Degussa, the same company that produced the Zyklon B poison used in the gas chambers. (I discovered this nasty fact at en.wikipedia.org.) How did this happen? NINA RAMOS

DANTO REPLIES

New York City

■ The claim is true. It was mentioned by various critics of the memorial. I think the cement used was made by the people who made bunkers. I didn't think this especially figured in a critical analysis of the work, so I didn't mention it. ARTHUR C. DANTO

OTHER VOICES, OTHER VICTIMS

Sussex, NJ

■ I was moved by Mark Anderson's "Crime and Punishment" [Oct. 17]. I am one of those Germans whose grandfather got killed on the Eastern Front, who lost three uncles, whose father was driven out with his parents of what is Poland today and who has two uncles who fought on the Eastern Front and in Africa and came back messed up in their heads, messed up by the terrifying war memories. None of them were party members. They were ordinary people.

I grew up behind the Iron Curtain in East Germany with the understanding that German suffering didn't exist. Acknowledging it, mentioning it, seemed to equal denying the Holocaust and other German war crimes. But somebody like my grandfather, an ordinary man, was no criminal. He didn't have a choice: He was drafted, and that was it. Only in recent years can one mention somebody like him as a victim without being accused of denying German responsibility for the war and crimes committed by the Germans. Thank you.

ULF KINTZEL

GRIP OF THE GRAMOPHONES

New York City

■ One thing unmentioned in Russell Platt's review of Joseph Horowitz's *Classical Music in America* ["New World Symphony," Oct. 3] was the role of recordings in destroying a musical culture that produced great musicians. As soon as the first primitive recordings appeared, as scratchy as they sounded, many musicians realized their ability to earn a living would be adversely affected. Just one example: In New York City of 1900 many "classy" restaurants had live bands. In New York City of 2005 almost no restaurant, classy or otherwise, features live music. They still think music enhances the eating of food, but it is so easy to provide canned music of innumerable varieties that the expense and fuss of live music, not to mention the dining space it takes up, seems wasteful.

Recording also created a class of canonical performers. Of course, there were legendary performers before records. But when records came along, all of a sudden every new virtuoso had to compete with every previously recorded one, and music became consumed with imitating the past. Music, an art form that depends on re-creation of the printed page, was suddenly an art form of artifacts, like the fine arts.

These two factors—the lack of status of or need for the ordinary musician, along with the celebrity status of certain ones of extraordinary talent, and the accretion over time of an immense and overwhelming heritage—sapped the vitality of music. And not just classical music. If you ask any devotee of the myriad subgenres of popular music, they will tell you that it's not real, because everything is driven by marketing. There is one 50 Cent where there used to be hundreds of kids doing improvised raps on the subway. BILL HALSEY

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EDITORIALS

The GOP Retreat

As the President took off for Asia in November to deliver more sermons on the virtues of democracy, small-d democratic dissent was at last finding its voice back home. For years George W. Bush's White House and party enforcers like the now-indicted Tom DeLay have ruled over Republicans with an iron fist. The troops in Congress slavishly accepted Bush's every whim, even when conservatives gagged on ideological contradictions like his fabulous budget deficits. Moderates were meek, silenced by the threat of punishment if they dared stray.

Hosannas! The zeitgeist appears to be changing. The lockstep politics engineered by Karl Rove has visibly weakened. Suddenly the GOP majority begins to resemble the Democrats of old, when they held power and were always fighting among themselves. In the House the GOP rank and file choked on their leadership's preposterous proposal for $54 billion in budget cuts, which whacked Medicaid, student loans and other down-home assistance while again cutting taxes for the rich. In the Senate GOP moderates also defected, joining Democrats to block Bush's tax cuts.

Undoing the savage inequalities of the Bush era will require a titanic fight, but the new-found courage of GOP moderates hints that significant changes are possible before Bush leaves town. This good news has one obvious source: the plummeting share price of the President's stock. After their recent election losses and with Bush's poll ratings hitting new lows, Republican politicians are wondering whether their incumbencies can withstand sustained Democratic assault in 2006. Why take chances by identifying with this deeply wounded leader?

Bush is bleeding for many reasons, but none more damaging than the ill-conceived and illegal war on Iraq. Thanks to vigilant Democrats, the Senate is at last pursuing an investigation into the manipulation of prewar intelligence. And it voted 98 to 0 to put strict limits on prisoner interrogations and require detailed White House reports on progress in restoring Iraqi sovereignty so US troops can be withdrawn (regrettably, in that same bill Democrats supported the unconscionable Graham compromise, which essentially guts habeas corpus protections for Guantánamo inmates).

Bush still admits no mistakes, seeking instead the refuge of scoundrels—false patriotism. The President's ploy will not succeed in silencing dissent, not when two-thirds of the country already doubt his honesty. These times have given the Democrats a golden opportunity. If they don't seize it by offering concrete alternatives that inspire the public, Bush could regain his equilibrium and the moment will be lost. Never has America been in greater need of leadership, and never has the field been more open for progressive solutions.

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More Leaks, Please!

The disappeared. From Stalin's Soviet Union to Pinochet's Chile, men and women who vanished into prisons that officially did not exist are emblems of modern totalitarian rule. So when the *Washington Post*'s Dana Priest disclosed a secret worldwide network of off-the-books CIA prison camps (including at least one former gulag outpost in Eastern Europe), a normal response would have been Congressional investigation. Hastert have indeed proposed an investigation—but a probe of reporter Priest's sources, not of the "black sites." And the Justice Department has its own criminal leak inquiry in the works.

Scandalous? Sure. But if Republicans have rushed to overpaint the picture of secret prison camps, they're using a brush handed to them by Democrats and the antiwar movement. As Senate Intelligence Committee chair Pat Roberts put it, "It's the same thing we did on the Valerie Plame issue," meaning: Launch investigators straight at the reporter/source relationship. While the conscience-driven desire of Priest's sources to expose the secret prisons could not be at further moral remove from Team Cheney's partisan yearning to delegitimize Joe Wilson, the fact is that months of Democratic calls for criminal prosecution in the outing of Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, give Republicans all the permission they need to deflect the "black sites" scandal, from violation of international law to breach of national security.

This turnabout amounts to alarming collateral damage from the Plame affair. From the beginning—even as antiwar Democrats sought historic vindication from Fitzgerald's investigation—the Bush Administration used the Plame inquiry as a club against leak-prone dissenting officials in the State Department, military and intelligence agencies. In September 2003 Bush himself announced the stakes: "If there is a leak out of my Administration, I want to know who it is. And if the person has violated the law, the person will be taken care of." He clearly wasn't talking about Karl Rove. And while Fitzgerald's investigation put the Vice President's office under pressure, the parade of journalists into the grand jury room nonetheless served the Administration's secrecy policy well, reminding would-be leakers that news organizations might not protect their sources as thoroughly as promised and that unauthorized "sources" could face criminal sanction.

A very real paranoia about leaks and leakers has descended on Washington. I've spoken to reporters who have fended off visits from the FBI, and to formerly press-friendly Washington insiders convinced that the current climate makes media contact inadvisable. The *Post* itself, courageously backing Priest's "black sites" story, nonetheless hedged on identifying the specific countries involved, even as the involvement of Poland, Romania and Hungary rapidly became an open secret and an EU scandal.

With Democrats and Republicans competing for the mantle of national-security protectors, it's important to remember how often the country has been damaged by foreign-policy secrecy claims used against leakers and journalists. In 1798 Benjamin Franklin Bache, Benjamin Franklin's grandson and an intrepid anti-Federalist editor, found himself on the wrong side of the Sedition Act after printing a secret letter from Talleyrand to Presi-

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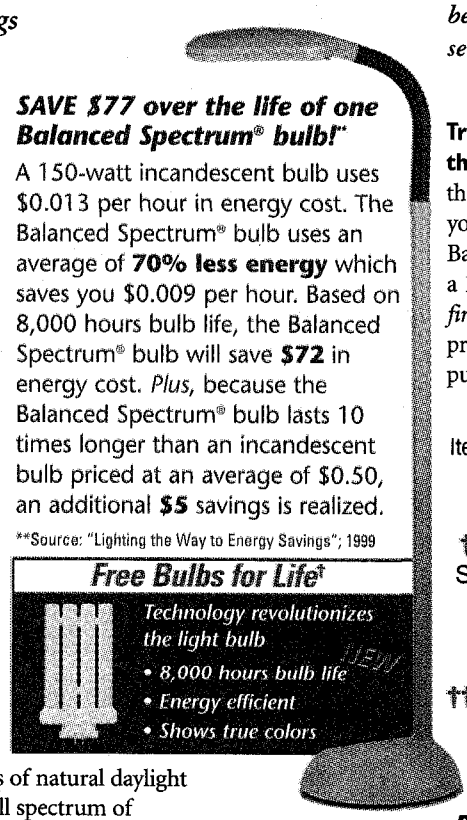

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COMMENT

dent Adams. The road to Watergate began with President Nixon's attempts to suppress publication of the Pentagon Papers—both in court and with the extralegal investigation of Daniel Ellsberg. Never mind all the CLASSIFIED stamps that for decades hid the CIA's role in assassination, torture and coups worldwide, and the attempts to punish former operatives who finally told the story.

Are power-friendly reporters—the Judith Millers and Bob Woodwards—too easily manipulated by selective leaks? Of course. But under certain circumstances—for instance, with a secrecy-obsessed White House waging a war that leaves many career foreign-service, military and intelligence officers aghast—what we casually call "leaking" is better described as whistleblowing. And when the conscience of public servants runs up against secrecy laws, whistleblowing becomes a form of civil disobedience. In recent months people have defied military orders, risked rank and position, and broken classification laws to bring information to journalists. When privates and corporals leak Abu Ghraib photos; when career intelligence officers leak news of rendition flights or secret prison camps; when reporters like Dana Priest investigate those claims, confirm them and put them on the front page; they are all taking up the responsibilities Congress refuses to accept, establishing the facts of US conduct in the fight against terrorism and documenting lines of accountability for flagrant abuses.

All this is a way of saying that the Democratic attack on the outing of Valerie Plame, so effective at exposing the corrupt origins of the Iraq War, cannot take the place of exposing the war's equally corrupting present. Let's revel in Scooter's troubles and cheer Dick Cheney's bloody nose. At the same time, though, let's understand that putting an end to the Bush White House's criminal policies requires *more* leaks. It would be a bitter irony indeed if the legacy of the Plame/Wilson case was that it shut down Washington whistleblowers. BRUCE SHAPIRO

Bruce Shapiro is editor of Shaking the Foundations: 200 Years of Investigative Journalism in America *(Nation Books).*

CALVIN TRILLIN

DON'T CRITICIZE ME

(A ballad crooned to the tune of "You Go to My Head" by George W. Bush, with backup by Karl Rove and His Singing Slimemeisters)

Don't criticize me. 'Cause that's just the thing our
enemies want.
And it damages our terrorist hunt,
And endangers every grunt at the front.

Yes, Cheney did flog that meeting in Prague, but
big deal—
Cheney's zeal's his appeal.
And don't say aloud Condi's next mushroom
cloud was unreal.
We're sure she'll have much more to reveal.

Don't criticize me. Evil foes would welcome that
kind of strife.
Since their goal is crushing our way of life,
We might have to smear both you and your wife.
Don't criticize me.
Don't criticize me.

In Kars and Frankfurt

Renowned Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, facing trial in Istanbul in December for "insulting Turkish national identity" with his comments about the Turkish genocide of Armenians and Kurds, delivered an address in October in Frankfurt before receiving the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Trade Association. Following are excerpts, translated by Maureen Freely. —*The Editors*

I grew up in a house where everyone read novels. My father had a large library, and when I was a child, my father would discuss the great novelists—Mann, Kafka, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy—the way other fathers discussed famous generals and saints. From an early age, all these novelists—these great novelists—were linked in my mind with the idea of Europe. But this is not just because I came from an Istanbul family that believed fervently in Westernization, and therefore longed, in its innocence, to believe itself and its country far more Western than they really were. It was also because the novel was one of the greatest artistic achievements to come out of Europe. The novel, like orchestral music and post-Renaissance painting, is in my opinion one of the cornerstones of European civilization; it is what makes Europe what it is, the means by which Europe has created and made visible its nature, if there is such a thing. I cannot think of Europe without novels.

I am speaking now of the novel as a way of thinking, understanding and imagining, and also as a way of imagining oneself as someone else. In other parts of the world, children and young people first meet Europe in depth with their first ventures into novels: I was one of them. To pick up a novel and step inside Europe's borders, to enter a new continent, a new culture, a new civilization—to learn, in the course of these novel explorations, to express oneself with new desire and new inspiration, and to believe, as a consequence, that one was part of Europe—this is how I remember feeling. And let us also remember that the great Russian novel, and the Latin American novel, also stem from European culture—so just to read a novel is to prove that Europe's borders, histories and national distinctions are in constant flux. The old Europe described in the French, Russian and German novels in my father's library is, like the postwar Europe of my own childhood and the Europe of today, a place that is forever changing, and so, too, is our understanding of what Europe means. However, I have one vision of Europe that

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is constant, and that is what I shall speak of now.

Let me begin by saying that Europe is a very delicate, very sensitive question for a Turk. Here we are, knocking on your door and asking to come in, full of high hopes and good intentions, but also feeling rather anxious and fearing rejection. I feel such things as keenly as other Turks. As Turkey knocks on Europe's door, as we wait and wait, and Europe makes us promises and then forgets us, only to raise the bar—and as Europe examines the full implications of Turkey's bid to become a full member, we've seen lamentable hardening of anti-Turkish sentiment in certain parts of Europe, at least among certain politicians. In the recent elections, when certain politicians took a political line against Turks and Turkey, I found their style just as dangerous as the political style adopted by certain politicians in my own country. It is one thing to criticize the deficiencies of the Turkish state vis-à-vis democracy, or to find fault with its economy; it is quite another to denigrate all of Turkish culture, or those of Turkish descent here in Germany whose lives are among the most difficult and impoverished in the country. As for Turks in Turkey—when they hear themselves judged so cruelly, they are reminded yet again that they are knocking on a door and waiting to be let in, and of course they feel unwelcome. The cruelest irony of all is that the fanning of nationalist anti-Turkish sentiment in Europe has provoked the coarsest of nationalist backlash inside Turkey. Those who believe in the European Union must see at once that the real choice we have to make is between peace and nationalism. Either we have peace, or we have nationalism. I think that the ideal of peace sits at the heart of the European Union and I believe that the chance of peace that Turkey has offered Europe will not, in the end, be spurned. We've arrived at a point where we must choose between the power of a novelist's imagination and the sort of nationalism that condones burning his books.

Over the past few years, I have spoken a great deal about Turkey and its EU bid; often I've been met with grimaces and suspicious questions. So let me answer them here and now. The most important thing that Turkey and the Turkish people have to offer Europe and Germany is, without a doubt, peace; it is the security and strength that will come from a Muslim country's desire to join Europe, and this peaceful desire's ratification. The great novelists I read as a child and a young man did not define Europe by its Christian faith but by its individuals. It was because they described Europe through heroes who were struggling to free themselves, express their creativity and make their dreams come true that their novels spoke to my heart. Europe has gained the respect of the non-Western world for the ideals it has done so much to nurture: liberty, equality and fraternity. If Europe's soul is enlightenment, equality and democracy, if it is to be a union predicated on peace, then Turkey has a place in it. A Europe defining itself on narrow Christian terms will, like a Turkey that tries to derive its strength only from its religion, be an inward-looking place divorced from reality, and more bound to the past than to the future.

Having grown up in a Westernized secular family in the European part of Istanbul, it is not at all difficult for me—or people like me—to believe in the European Union. Don't forget, since childhood my football team, Fenerbahçe, has been playing in the European Cup. There are millions of Turks like me, who believe

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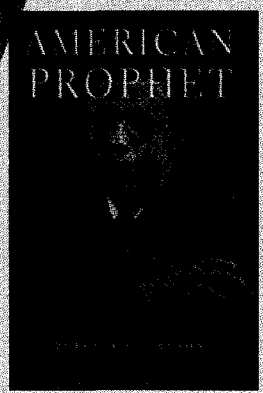

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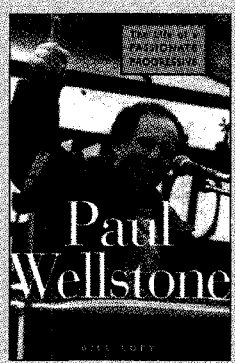

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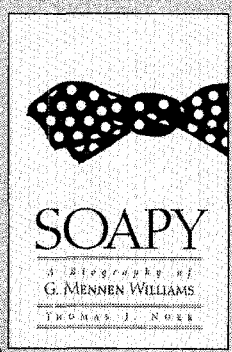

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COMMENT

heart and soul in the European Union. But what is more important is that most of today's conservative and Muslim Turks, and with them their political representatives, want to see Turkey in the European Union, help to plan Europe's future, dreaming it into being and helping to build it. Coming as it does after centuries of war and conflict, this gesture of friendship cannot be taken lightly, and to reject it outright would be cause for huge regret. Just as I cannot imagine a Turkey without a European prospect, I cannot believe in a Europe without a Turkish prospect. ORHAN PAMUK

Orhan Pamuk is the author, most recently, of Istanbul *and* Snow. *He was awarded the 2005 Prix Medicis and won the International IMPAC Award in 2003 for* My Name Is Red.

Bush's War on the Press

In his speech to last spring's National Media Reform Conference in St. Louis, Bill Moyers accused the Bush Administration not merely of attacking his highly regarded PBS program *NOW* but of declaring war on journalism itself. "We're seeing unfold a contemporary example of the age-old ambition of power and ideology to squelch and punish journalists who tell the stories that make princes and priests uncomfortable," explained Moyers. With the November resignation of Moyers's nemesis, Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) board chair Ken Tomlinson, amid charges of personal and political wrongdoing and a host of other recent developments, it becomes increasingly clear that this White House is doing battle with the journalistic underpinnings of democracy.

To be sure, every administration has tried to manipulate the nation's media system. Bill Clinton's wrongheaded support for the Telecommunications Act of 1996 cleared the way for George W. Bush's attempts to give media companies the power to create ever larger and more irresponsible monopolies. But with its unprecedented campaign to undermine and, where possible, eliminate independent journalism, the Bush Administration has demonstrated astonishing contempt for the Constitution and considerable fear of an informed public. Consider the bill of particulars:

§ *Corrupting PBS.* Tomlinson's tenure at the CPB, which annually distributes $400 million in federal funding to broadcast outlets, was characterized by an assault on the news operations of the Public Broadcasting Service in general, and Moyers in particular, for airing dissenting voices and preparing investigative reports on the Administration. His goal was clearly to fire a shot across the bow of all public stations so managers would shy away from the sort of investigative journalism that might expose Bush Administration malfeasance. On November 15, on the heels of Tomlinson's resignation, the CPB's inspector general issued a sixty-seven-page report documenting Tomlinson's repeated violations of the Public Broadcasting Act, CPB rules and the CPB code of ethics with his political meddling, though it stopped short of calling for prosecution, or of examining the link between Tomlinson's actions and White House directives.

§ *Faking TV News.* Under Bush Administration directives, at least twenty federal agencies have produced and distributed scores, perhaps hundreds, of "video news segments" out of a $254 million slush fund. These bogus and deceptive stories have been broadcast on TV stations nationwide without any acknowledgment that they were prepared by the government rather than local journalists. The segments—which trumpet Administration "successes," promote its controversial line on issues like Medicare reform and feature Americans "thanking" Bush—have been labeled "covert propaganda" by the Government Accountability Office.

§ *Paying Off Pundits.* The Administration has made under-the-table payments to at least three pundits to sing its praises, including Armstrong Williams, the conservative columnist who collected $240,000 from the Education Department and then cheered on the ill-conceived No Child Left Behind Act.

§ *Turning Press Conferences Into Charades.* Bush has all but avoided traditional press conferences, closing down a prime venue for holding the executive accountable. On those rare occasions when he deigned to meet reporters, presidential aides turned the press conferences into parodies by seating a friendly right-wing "journalist," former male escort Jeff Gannon, amid the reporters and then steering questions to him when tough issues arose. They have effectively silenced serious questioners, like veteran journalist Helen Thomas, by refusing to have the President or his aides call on reporters who challenge them. And they have established a hierarchy for journalists seeking interviews with Administration officials, which favors networks that give the White House favorable coverage—as the frequent appearances by Bush and Dick Cheney on Fox News programs will attest.

§ *Gutting the Freedom of Information Act.* As Eric Alterman detailed in a May 9 report in these pages, the Administration has scrapped enforcement of the Freedom of Information Act and has made it harder for reporters to do their jobs by refusing to cooperate with even the most basic requests for comment and data from government agencies. This is part of a broader clampdown on access to information that has made it virtually impossible for journalists to cover vast areas of government activity.

§ *Obscuring the Iraq War.* In addition to setting up a system for embedding reporters covering the war—which denied Americans

In Fact . . .

SCHEER: I'M STILL HERE

■ On November 11 longtime *Nation* contributor Robert Scheer learned he'd been fired by the *Los Angeles Times*, where he has worked as a reporter and columnist for thirty years. Scheer's comment on being sacked: "Publisher Jeff Johnson, who has offered not a word of explanation to me, has privately told people he hated every word I wrote. I assume that mostly refers to my exposing the lies used by President Bush to justify the invasion of Iraq. My only regret is that my pen was not sharper and my words tougher." Scheer will be replaced by two right-wing columnists, among others. His readers picketed the Times building on November 15. We're glad to report that the *San Francisco Chronicle* will be the new home for Bob's column, which, of course, will still be at www.thenation.com.

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a full picture of what was happening during the invasion—the Defense Department has denied access to basic information regarding the war, from accurate casualty counts to images of flag-draped coffins of US dead to the Abu Ghraib torture photos.

§ *Pushing Media Monopoly.* The Administration continues to make common cause with the most powerful broadcast corporations in an effort to rewrite ownership laws in a manner that favors dramatic new conglomeratization and monopoly control of information. The Administration's desired rules changes would strike a mortal blow to local journalism, as media "company towns" would be the order of the day. This cozy relationship between media owners and the White House (remember Viacom chair Sumner Redstone's 2004 declaration that re-electing Bush would be "good for Viacom"?) puts additional pressure on journalists who know that when they displease the Administration they also displease their bosses.

In his famous opinion in the 1945 *Associated Press v. US* case, Justice Hugo Black said that "the First Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public, that a free press is a condition of a free society." In other words, a free press is the sine qua non of the entire American Constitution and republican experiment.

The Bush Administration attack on the foundations of self-government demands a response of similar caliber. Under pressure from media-reform activists Congress has begun to push back, with a strong bipartisan vote in the Senate Commerce Committee to limit the ability of federal agencies to produce covert video news segments and to investigate Defense Department spending on propaganda initiatives. But until the Administration is held accountable by Congress for all its assaults on journalism, and until standards are developed to assure that such abuses will not be repeated by future administrations, freedom of the press will exist in name only, with all that suggests for our polity.

JOHN NICHOLS AND ROBERT W. MCCHESNEY

John Nichols, The Nation*'s Washington correspondent, and Robert W. McChesney, a University of Illinois journalism professor, are the co-founders of the media reform group Free Press (www.freepress.net), which is leading the national battle on all these issues. They are the authors of the new book* Tragedy & Farce: How American Media Sell Wars, Spin Elections and Destroy Democracy *(New Press).*

President Thelma

SPECTACLE

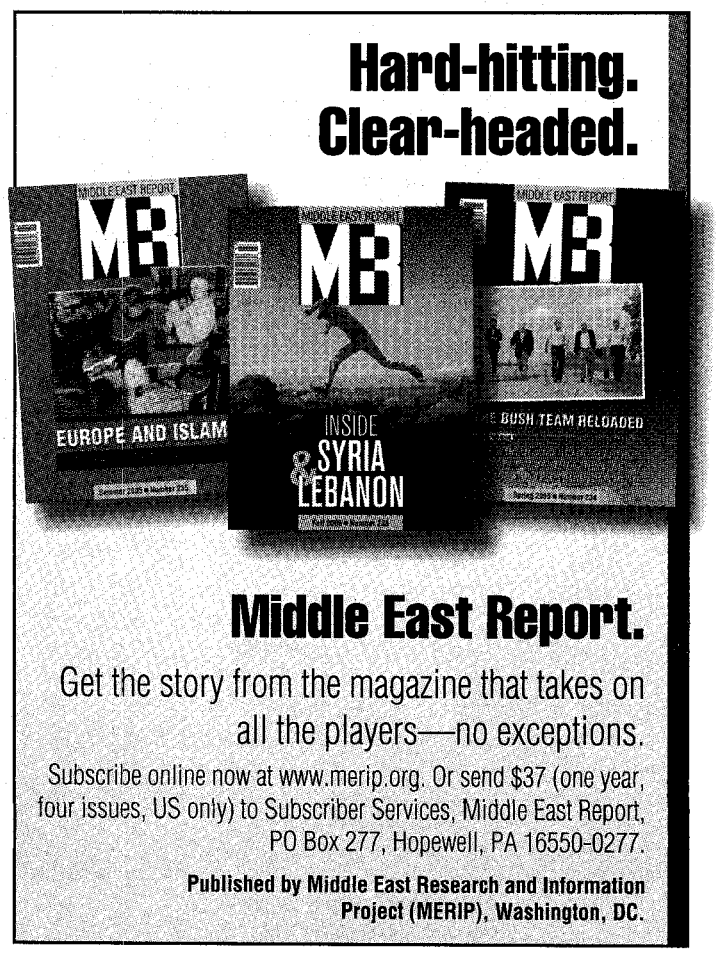
Men won't watch what women enjoy: That's been the golden rule of television for decades. But lately things have begun to loosen up. Female characters are being integrated into traditionally male formats, such as forensic dramas and *policiers*, without alienating the men in the audience. Guys will tolerate a hard-nosed woman, even if she's in charge, as long as her major task is dealing with the rambunctious stags around her. But *Commander in Chief* is doing very well among viewers of both sexes, even though its female protagonist isn't just another boss. She's the President.

In a desultory fall season, this show has garnered much attention, especially among right-wing bloggers and pundits. Ostensibly their ire is up because they think President Mackenzie Allen is a stalking horse for a certain ambitious senator from New York. *Commander in Chief* is "softening up the country" for Hillary Clinton, frets conservative pundit John Fund, echoing a remark by Florida Representative Katherine Harris. That may well be its intention, since several Clintonistas (including disgraced ex–National Security Adviser Sandy Berger) are on the payroll. But it's not why millions of men are tuning in. That has less to do with Hillary than with the erotics of subverting the sexual order.

Many women and gay men find role-reversal stimulating, and always have. Now, it seems, straight guys can enjoy this process without turning it into a kitten-and-whip fantasy. *That's* a shift with social implications. In drama, unlike real life, once you change the sex of the alpha everything changes. Each exchange is loaded with new complexities, and the gender hierarchy is exposed. When President Allen (*a k a* "Mack") makes a decision and her aides snap, "Yes, ma'am," there's a *frisson* in the air. When she walks past important men with a faintly flirtatious saunter, the sizzle is palpable. It lingers under the banal dialogue like a caffeinated buzz.

The producers of this show have done everything possible to keep this high on the down-low. As a result, *Commander in Chief*

(Continued on Page 67)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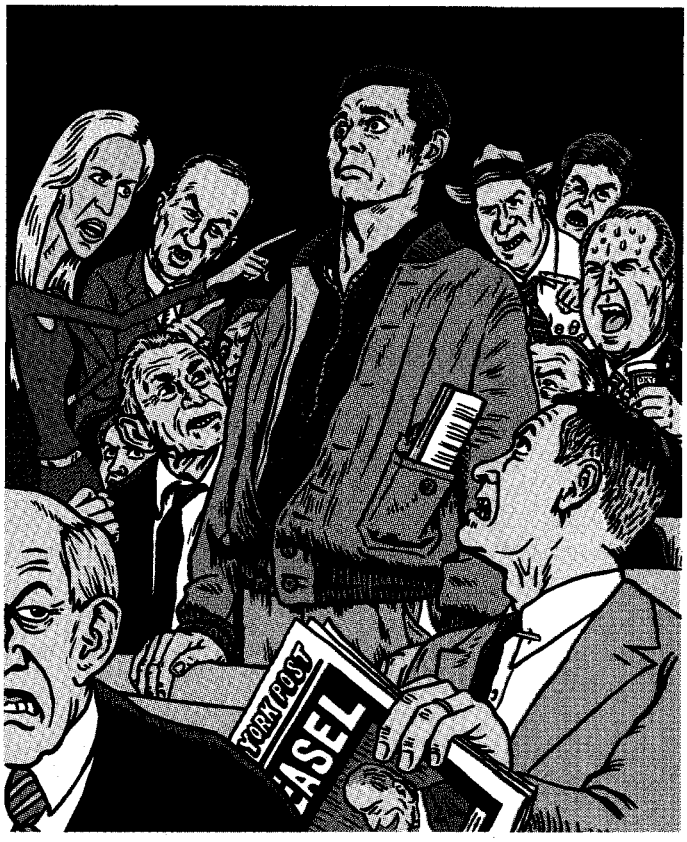

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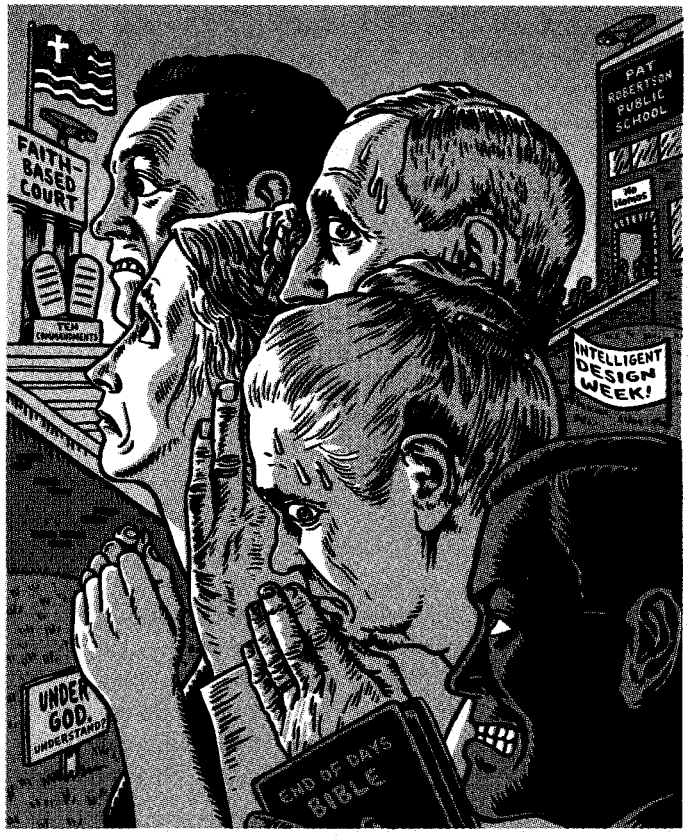
(FORMERLY FREEDOM OF SPEECH)



FREEDOM OF MANDATORY PRAYER
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FREEDOM TO BE FEARFUL
(FORMERLY FREEDOM FROM FEAR)

FREEDOM TO SUPERSIZE IT
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Ward Sutton

Ward Sutton is a weekly cartoonist and author of Sutton Impact: The Political Cartoons of Ward Sutton *(Seven Stories Press).*

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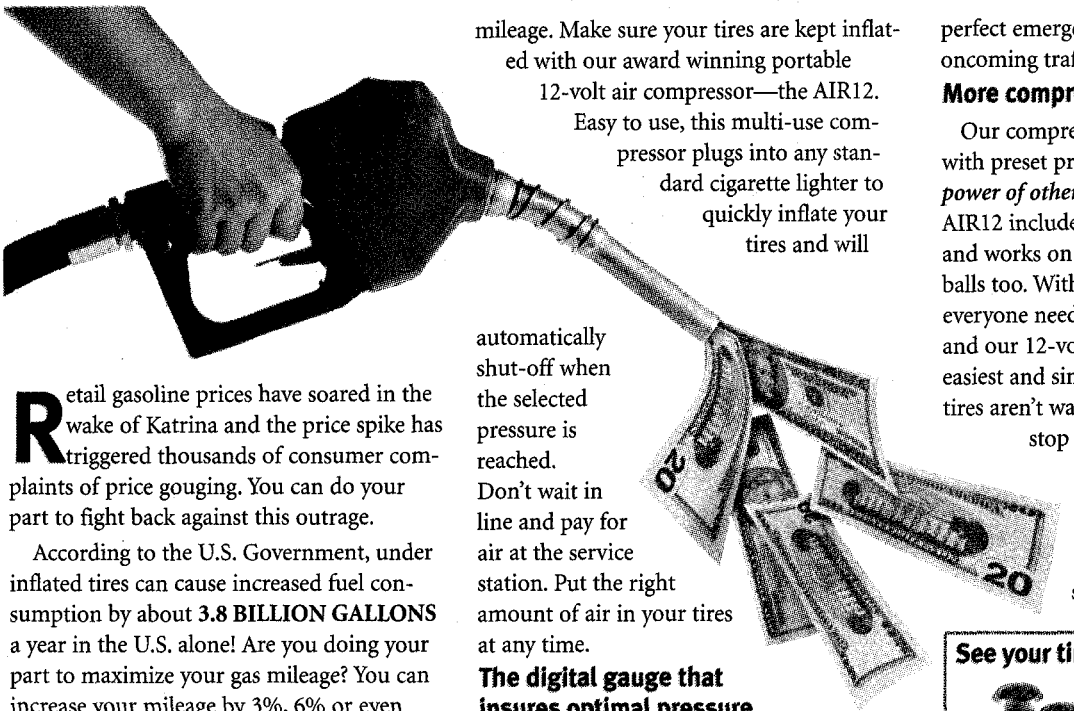

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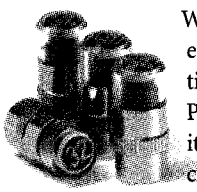

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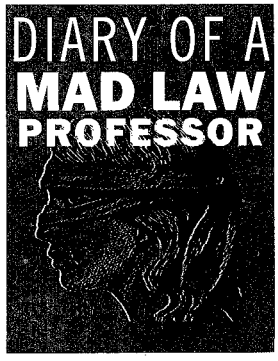
Unholy Wars



Recently while surfing the Net, I found an odd little item on the website DiscussAnything.com. It was a story about a pastor in Waco, Texas, who was electrocuted in front of his congregation when he seized a microphone while standing waist-deep in the waters of the baptismal font. "I'm terribly ashamed," wrote one blogger, "but I must admit I chuckled reading that." Someone angrily countered that it was not funny, that the man had left behind a wife and three children. Someone else wondered why God was angry enough to render unto him such just deserts. Bloggers fought about whether any nincompoop should know not to take a mike into water; whether you could laugh at the irony or whether you should cringe at the tragedy; whether you were blasphemous in trying to imagine why God called anyone to his side; whether in killing the father it was also God's will that the family would fall into poverty; whether the church's congregation would take care of the widow's earthly needs all the way through three college tuitions, or whether she should be praying for government assistance starting immediately with daycare.

It's the kind of story that's perfect for projection—only the sketchiest of actual details, yet occurring to a man of God! In the baptistry, no less! It's hard to resist the literary challenge, the ideological contest of it all. I'm brooding as I'm blogging; every disaster seems laden with such inventive surmising, becomes a fable about divine punishment. The fabulous nature overtakes any sense of cause and effect. Five years ago I laughed whenever Pat Robertson opened his mouth. Now I listen closely to everything he says like it's the Ides of March and he's Julius Caesar's seer. So when he says that Dover, Pennsylvania, has drawn down the wrath of God by voting the creationists off its school board, I worry that if he does not exactly verbalize God's commandments, he does express the driving beliefs of those who share a certain mean superstitiousness that informs our very real political life, driving us away from that Puritan vision of the City on the Hill and sending us hellbent toward Armageddon. "If there's a disaster in your area," he threatened, "don't turn to God for help.... God is tolerant and loving, but we can't keep sticking our finger in his eyes forever." In the name of that loving God, Mr. Robertson has rationalized the destruction of New Orleans as the wages of sin, called for the assassination of Hugo Chávez and mused about bombing the State Department.

It used to be only the very far fringes who projected their prejudices in a rain of damnation—small groups like members of the Westboro Baptist Church, who spent the past six months traveling the country haunting the funerals of soldiers who'd died in Iraq, shouting that their deaths were God's punishment for the state's having allowed gay marriages. But then Rick Santorum, third-ranking Republican in the Senate, opined that Boston's political liberalism was why priests there felt free to molest children. And Bill O'Reilly has chided the Bay Area for being too liberal by inviting Al Qaeda to "go ahead" and blow up Coit Tower. Holy war feels so near at hand, so palpable. Poor God feels like an excuse for human zealotry, a cipher for random attributions of cause and effect. I'm intrigued by this projected sense of anger, this supremely unquestioning confidence about what God thinks. This certainty is frightening, and one can hear it everywhere.

Pat Robertson and the pastoral advice-meisters propping up the White House adhere to a theology that leaves no room for doubt. The unfolding of the universe is planned and has clear cause and effect that you never have to ponder or research beyond the revelation in your own heart. Although they claim that intelligent design is about a mysterious force, an invisible hand, there is a raging resistance to knowledge itself; there is a faith in faith itself. It is an intolerance of the kind of uncertainty that science depends upon, that leads to testing, probing, making connections wherever they may lead. Rather, the emphasis is on taking at face value, accepting as gospel, trusting authority. It is blasphemy to look behind, to test, to challenge, to go outside the text.

I heard a very similar kind of imputation of blasphemy when I listened to George W. Bush's recent speeches chiding, among others, Democrats and dissenters for aiding and abetting the enemy. On the one hand he speaks of good news across the globe, of the winds of democracy and the sweet breath of liberty. Yet he also speaks against a backdrop of loud protests in every port of call he visits, from Europe to Latin America. He urges us to support the continued presence of our troops in Iraq when every news outlet on earth is reporting that our troops have used white phosphorous incendiary devices to illegally torch insurgents and possibly civilians. Every news outlet on earth is reporting the discovery of emaciated prisoners in the basement of Iraq's Interior Ministry. The BBC reports that Shiite death squads have been gathering Sunni men from their homes at night, allegedly under the watchful eyes of American forces, and spiriting them off to be tortured and killed using electric drills, guns, knives, electrical shocks. European papers are filled with outrage about the CIA allegedly having used their airports or hidden prisoners in secret locations within their boundaries, for the sole purpose of torture. Saddam Hussein was allegedly beaten by court clerks for cursing the Shiites while his American guards laughed. Meanwhile, the so-called Graham Amendment would cut off judicial review of prisoners indefinitely detained without charge at Guantánamo Bay and other secret locations.

Whether it was a good or a bad thing to have "pre-emptively" invaded Iraq, it is high time we stopped worrying about whether Democrats are the seditious ones and just admit what a mistake it was. The conduct of this war has embarrassed us, lowered us, endangered us and betrayed our best ideals. We can continue to blame San Francisco or Massachusetts liberals or priests or a vengeful God. But as surely as water carries current, so the debasement of our troops and the lawlessness of our leaders carry risks that need no causal adornment: It is shocking, merciless and infinitely destabilizing. ■

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ERIC ALTERMAN

The Lies That Bind

American politics experienced a kind of harmonic convergence of bullshit at the end of the second week of November, as we were treated, during a twenty-four-hour period, to the following:

§ George W. Bush, speaking to a military audience on Veterans Day, announced that those who suggest the Administration "manipulated the intelligence" are "fully aware that a bipartisan Senate investigation found no evidence of political pressure to change the intelligence community's judgments."

§ Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Chalabi, speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations, told the crowd: "There is no communal strife in Iraq"; "95 percent of the corruption in the [oil] contracts...has been eliminated"; and "the Iraqi people...have achieved freedom."

§ On *Larry King Live* former *New York Times* reporter Judy Miller termed Chalabi "very straightforward" in the information he gave her and added, "My conscience is clear, and I guess I wouldn't change much."

§ *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. told Charlie Rose that "morale is just great" at his paper and called the Miller affair "a rather small-bore issue in the big scheme of things."

OK, so it's not exactly a surprise that our President is an almost comically brazen liar. He would know, if he cared to, that the commission to which he refers was specifically enjoined from examining the question of whether he, Cheney and his advisers manipulated the intelligence they passed on to Congress and the American people. (As commission co-chair Laurence Silberman explained, "Our executive order did not direct us to deal with the use of intelligence by policy-makers, and all of us were agreed that was not part of our inquiry.") And he may also be aware that Dick Cheney and (Irv) Scooter Libby, as Murray Waas reported in *National Journal*, specifically refused to provide information to Congress about how they used prewar intelligence. Indeed, it's hardly controversial to say "Bush" and "liar" together anywhere but in the mainstream media. In a recent *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll, 57 percent of respondents said Bush deliberately misled the country into war, and barely a third said they consider him "honest and straightforward."

Chalabi, too, is known to be a distant stranger to the truth. A convicted embezzler in Jordan and accused spy for Iran, he helped mastermind the campaign of deception necessary to fool America into this disastrous war with the help of Bush's neocon advisers as well as then–*Times* reporter Judith Miller. (According to an angry e-mail Miller sent to her more conscientious colleague, Baghdad bureau chief John Burns, Chalabi had "provided most of the front page exclusives on WMD to our paper.")

Miller does appear to have changed her mind ever so slightly. Not long after the *Times* issued its famously incomplete WMD Editor's Note, she gave an interview in which she remained, in author James Moore's words, "righteously indignant," telling him: "I was proved fucking right" in her WMD reporting. Today she admits those stories might have been the teensiest bit incorrect, but she cannot see why anyone would blame her or how any reporter could possibly have avoided it.

Still, for all the damage she did, Miller was just a reporter. None of it would matter if the *Times* did not stake its credibility on her reporting, going so far as to lift its own rules by reporting under her byline on its front page that Iraqi officials burned and buried their unconventional weapons just before the American invasion, based on Pentagon-provided information from an Iraqi "scientist" to whom Miller was not allowed even to speak. Miller went to jail, as everyone knows, for eighty-five days to protect her right to keep her conversations with Libby secret, during which time the paper put her court case above its readers' right to information, failing to pursue stories that might have angered the judge or prosecutor and allowing competitors to scoop it on a daily basis on one of the biggest stories in Washington. This was a fundamental breach of trust with its readers, and it is not one that can be easily repaired. As one angry *Times* editor put it to me: "Jayson Blair was a rogue cop. Judy is *Chinatown*."

Even with the evil spirit of Howell Raines exorcised from West 43rd Street, it's an unspeakably weird moment in the life of the once–Gray Lady. On the one hand the Sulzbergers are to be feted and thanked for their commitment to investing lots of money in what strikes everybody else as a dying business and for doing so in a manner supportive of its unique and crucial role in our political system. However, the paper's honchos are demonstrating an almost schizophrenic relationship to both the truth and simple logic, which strikes many observers as, one might say... tortured.

Why did the editors treat Miller as Joan of Arc one day and Lady Macbeth the next, with no explanation for the volte-face? Why did executive editor Bill Keller refuse to allow a correction when TV critic Alessandra Stanley slandered Geraldo Rivera by making an unsupportable allegation against him, even in the view of the *Times* public editor? Why will the *Times* not issue a long-overdue correction for William Safire's assertion that it was an "undisputed fact" that Mohamed Atta met with the head of the Iraqi secret service in Prague in April 2001, when just across the page the editors complained as recently as November 15 that "Vice President Dick Cheney presented the Prague meeting as a fact when even the most supportive analysts considered it highly dubious"? Finally, when will the *Times* give us a full accounting of how its reporters were fooled by the White House into this ruinous and counterproductive war—and what kinds of safeguards have been put in place to prevent another such violation of the basic principles of democratic accountability?

Here's one idea. Given that, as the *Times* editors accurately relate, "the only problem [with each Administration argument for the war] is that none of it has been true," how about a ban on anonymous Administration sources? If they're going to lie to us, let them lie under their own names, on their own dime (or Rupert Murdoch's). Why not, Messrs Sulzberger and Keller, rescue the *Times* by rescuing the news as well? ■

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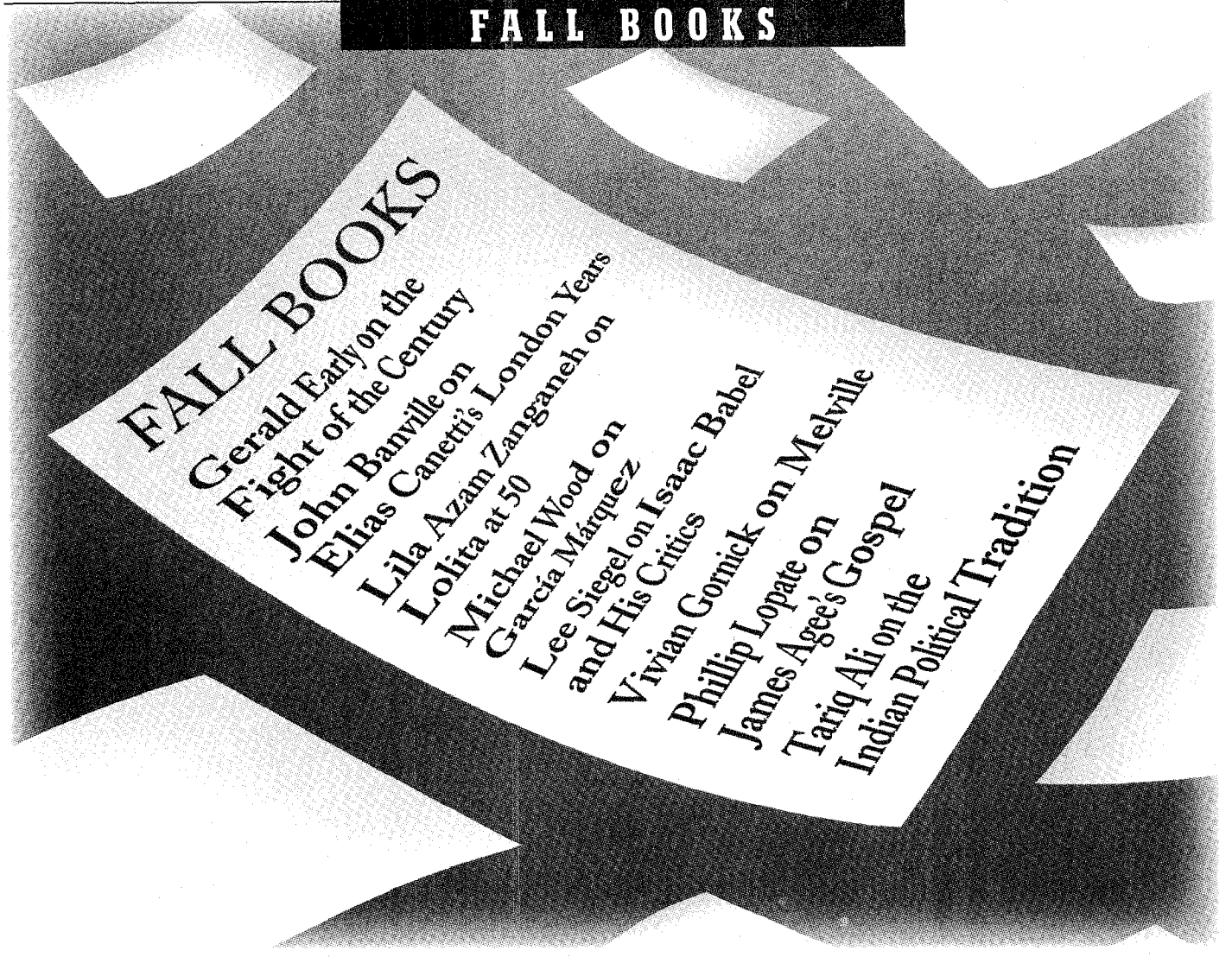
FALL BOOKS


FALL BOOKS
Gerald Early on the Fight of the Century
John Banville on Elias Canetti's London Years
Lila Azam Zanganeh on Lolita at 50
Michael Wood on García Márquez
Lee Siegel on Isaac Babel and His Critics
Vivian Gornick on Melville
Phillip Lopate on James Agee's Gospel
Tariq Ali on the Indian Political Tradition

In 1969 the French writer Georges Perec published a most curious novel, *La Disparition* (translated into English as *A Void*), whose defining feature was not what it contained but what it did not. From the title to the final page, *La Disparition* omitted the letter "e." Those readers familiar with French, a language rich in e's, know this was no small achievement, even if the results stretched the boundaries of sense. We have not attempted anything so daring or whimsical in our Fall Books Issue; we have not been led by a concept, or inspired by a Perecian game. Yet Fall Books is similarly marked by what it omits. You will hardly turn up any references, in the dozen essays here, to the Iraq War, Israel-Palestine, the urban unrest in France, the crises of either Judith Miller or the Fool on the Hill, whose middle initial, as it happens, is also the title of Perec's haunting roman à clef, *W*. What you will find, instead, is a selection of stylishly crafted essays—polemical and contemplative, erudite and earthy, elegiac and irreverent—on literature and intellectual history, film and philosophy, jazz and boxing.

A void? A way of escaping a dreary present? On the contrary, we hope that Fall Books offers a way of engaging with the world in a more introspective fashion, through culture, where politics and aesthetics collide and cause sparks to fly. Among the topics explored here are race (Gerald Early on the fight between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling), the legacy of the Enlightenment (David Bell on Voltaire and Rousseau), the torments of colonialism (Kate Levin on the Cuban novelist Maya Montero's *Captain of the Sleepers*), the roots of Indian democracy (Tariq Ali on the philosopher Amartya Sen), Euro-American relations (David Yaffe on jazz in the Old World), Jews and the Russian Revolution (Lee Siegel on Isaac Babel) and sexual Puritanism (Lila Azam Zanganeh on the moral panic set off by Nabokov's *Lolita* in Eisenhower's America). Yet in addressing these topics, the contributors to Fall Books are more playful than dutiful, seeking not merely to edify but to provide pleasure, something our public life seems bent on denying us.

—Adam Shatz & Christine Smallwood

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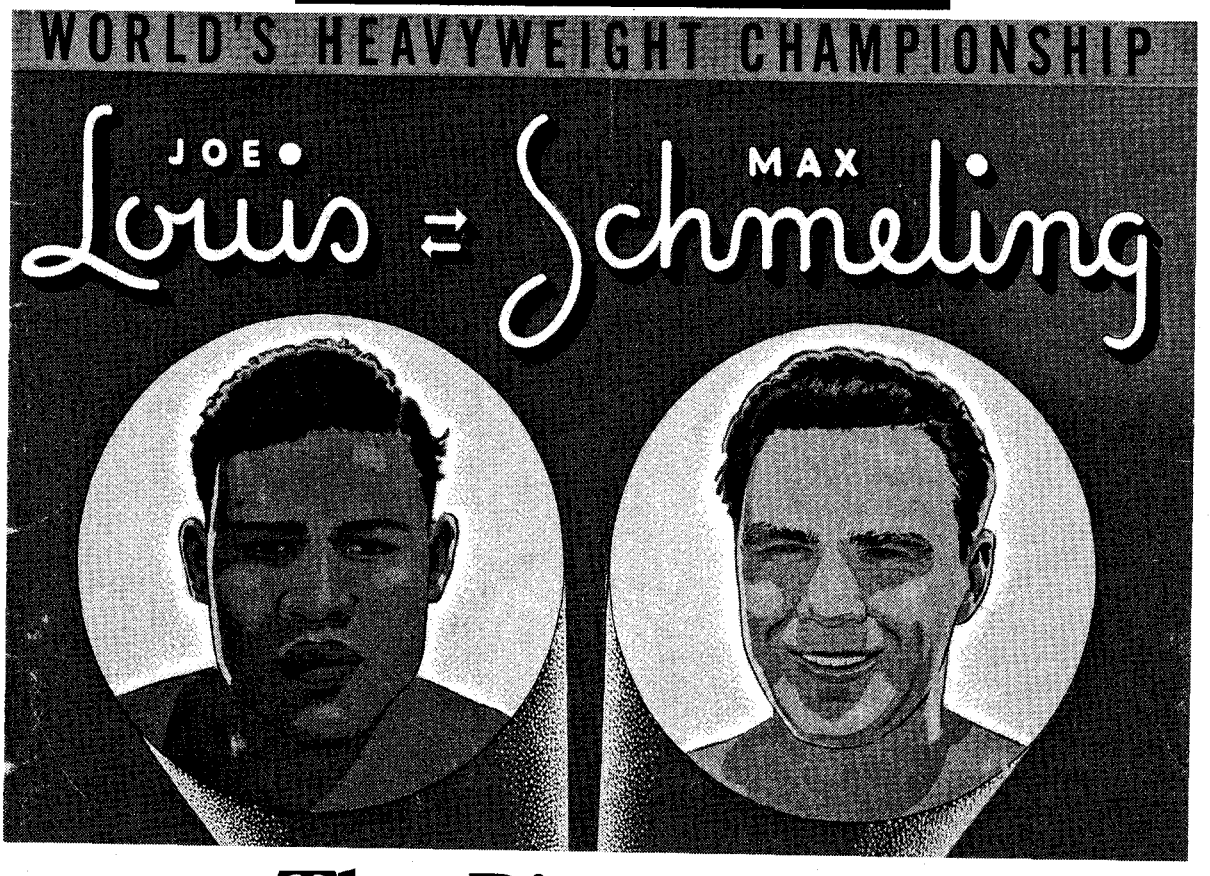

The Ring Cycle

GERALD EARLY

BEYOND GLORY: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling and a World on the Brink.
By David Margolick. Knopf. 423 pp. $26.95.

RING OF HATE: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling—The Fight of the Century.
By Patrick Myler. Arcade. 246 pp. $25.

THE GREATEST FIGHT OF OUR GENERATION: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling.
By Lewis Erenberg. Oxford. 274 pp. $28.

Before the professional boxing industry became mired in opportunistic disorganization and corporate greed, which have undone the sport more than the Mafia ever could, the so-called Fight of the Century occurred with greater frequency than the name would suggest. Indeed, epochal prizefights once seemed to take place at least every generation, if not every dozen years or so. These were the days when boxing and boxers mattered to the general public, when boxing was more than a peculiar and marginalized taste in athletic competition, when certain fights captured the imagination of the masses, the pulse of popular sentiment so dramatically that they dominated the news. And although there have been a number of popular and important fighters who fought in the featherweight, lightweight, welterweight and middleweight divisions, from Benny Leonard and Henry Armstrong to Barney Ross and Kid Gavilan, from Willie Pep and Sugar Ray Robinson to Roberto Duran and Sugar Ray Leonard, the fighters who have had the biggest impact on the public have been heavyweights: John Sullivan, Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson and, of course, Joe Louis.

That three books on the June 22, 1938, rematch in New York between champion Joe Louis and German challenger Max

Gerald Early, the Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters at Washington University in St. Louis, is the author of several books, including The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature and Modern American Culture, *which won the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism.*

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Schmeling—the investigative journalist David Margolick's *Beyond Glory*, the boxing writer Patrick Myler's *Ring of Hate* and the historian Lewis Erenberg's *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation*—should appear in the same year seems a bit uncanny and, surely for some, a bit of coincidental overkill, as the names of both fighters have faded over time. (Muhammad Ali did much to keep Louis's name alive in the 1960s and '70s, because he chose to define himself as the anti–Joe Louis, not patriotic and not self-effacing, and because sportswriters of Ali's time frequently compared the two men. And Louis was still alive then and occasionally in good mental and physical health. The two men, after some initial antagonism when Ali won the title in 1964 and then when he opposed the draft, got along better as Ali grew older.) Since boxing is no longer a popular or glamorous sport—in fact, to borrow the subtitle of one author, it teeters "on the brink" of extinction—and since boxing books rarely sell well, it's fair to ask why major publishing houses would put out books on a fight that happened nearly seventy years ago, a fight few people under 60 who are not boxing aficionados know about and to which hardly any living witnesses remain. (One would think that a book on the 1974 Ali–George Foreman fight in Zaire or the February 1990 fight between Mike Tyson and Buster Douglas in Japan, which resulted in Tyson's shocking defeat—recent matches involving celebrity boxers—would fare better with the public.)

What these three books exploit, not unjustifiably, and what may account for their commercial appeal, is the mystique of the so-called Greatest Generation, an era of intense nostalgia for many Americans, probably because so many see it as a simpler, more virtuous time, a fleeting moment of unabashed American triumphalism for both the left and the right, despite their distinctly antagonistic views of the New Deal. And if there was one symbolic event that defined the world of the 1930s, one self-consciously constructed drama that encapsulated both the hopes and fears of the era, it was arguably this fight. The Louis-Schmeling rematch of 1938 powerfully links Depression-era America (democracy and capitalism on the brink of chaos), Depression-era Europe (the Old World on the brink of war) and the political and social dynamics of World War II (the defeat of fascism and America's last unambiguously "good" war). The fact that both men served in the armed forces of their respective countries during the war—Schmeling, a paratrooper, was injured in a parachute jump in Crete in 1941—only intensified the symbolism of the event for many years after the fight itself.

Both Louis and Schmeling are remembered for this fight more than any other in their careers: Louis because he won an important fight under enormous pressure and looked virtually invincible in the ring; Schmeling because he lost the most important fight of his career so ignominiously and so shockingly. A black man from Detroit by way of Alabama, a representative of one of "the lesser breeds," Louis became an American hero in a country thoroughly saturated with racism by beating a German fighter who represented Aryan superiority, the ideal of white masculine power that the American social and political order still endorsed. Schmeling, who embodied Nazi doctrine (although he only obliquely espoused it and never did so publicly), was never competitive in the fight; he hardly even struck his opponent, who was nine years younger in a rugged profession where such an age difference had significance. That the fight turned out as it did was not inevitable, but neither was it an accident. For the rise of Joe Louis and the fall of Max Schmeling were fashioned or strategized by a number of people besides the two principals, not the least of whom were Jews, who, Margolick informs us, were hugely influential in boxing in the 1930s as boxers, managers, promoters and sportswriters.

Louis was up against not only Schmeling but white supremacy itself—an ideal shared by both Nazi Germany and American society.

In the 1930s boxing embodied simultaneously the two theories of diversity in American society: It was both a melting pot and an expression of pluralism. It was more democratic than virtually any other sport, open to all regardless of race, class, religion or even size, as long as one was an able-bodied man. It was, indeed, one of the few sports where blacks could compete against whites. Baseball and college football, the two most popular sports of the time, were segregated. Blacks were permitted to fight despite unofficial restrictions against their competing for the heavyweight title, imposed after the reign of Jack Johnson (1908–15), the first black ever to hold that title and who, because his attitude was insufficiently deferential to his white opponents and because he had a penchant for marrying white women, was eventually prosecuted under the Mann Act, left the country and was finally defeated by a mediocre white American fighter in Havana.

But while boxing offered more or less equal opportunity by the standards of the time, it dramatized its contests along racial and ethnic lines: Jews against Irish, Irish against Italians, Filipinos against Mexicans, and blacks against anyone white. (Some fighters adopted ethnicities for box office purposes: Max Baer became a Jew, for instance, because Jews made up an important percentage of the boxing audience of New York, which had become the center of boxing by the Depression.) The largely working-class crowds that attended most fights identified with the fighters who represented their tribe, something promoters encouraged in order to increase attendance and to stimulate betting, the raison d'être for the sport. All men were equal in the ring, but all men were not merely men. They were clumsy, cheesy political symbols for the unwashed.

The Louis-Schmeling fight of 1938, attended by nearly 70,000 paying customers at Yankee Stadium, assumed a great deal of its drama from this old boxing tradition of making fights matter by making racial difference matter. Yet this fight was no run-of-the-mill racial brawl. The historical moment in the late 1930s, with the rise of fascism in Europe, made it seem that more was at stake than simply the money people were willing to wager on the outcome. With this fight, boxing's fictive politics became intensely real.

Max Schmeling first achieved fame in Weimar Germany, where he was courted by intellectuals and artists, many of them Jews. When the Nazis seized power in 1933, he tried to remain neutral, claiming to be a mere "sportsman." This was no easy task, since he had to negotiate the political transformation of his own country while at the same time trying to remain popular in the United States, where the money in professional boxing was. He walked an uneasy line, allowing himself to be used by the Nazis as a symbol when convenient while taking pains not to offend Americans, particularly Jews, who dominated the business of the sport in the United States. Thus at home he had a German manager, Max Machon, to please the Nazis, while his American manager, Joe Jacobs, was Jewish, a necessity to advance in the sport in the United States at the time. (Ultimately Jacobs was marginalized by the Nazis, re-

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duced to a sort of errand boy or water carrier.) Schmeling learned English, learned to shmooze with the best of them and became something of a cosmopolitan, an unusual image for a boxer but a useful one for someone who was unwilling and unable to denounce Nazism. Schmeling became heavyweight champion in 1930 when his opponent, Jack Sharkey, fouled him so severely he was unable to continue, becoming the first and only fighter to win the title that way. He lost his title in 1932 to Sharkey in a fight he thought he had won. His career seemed on the skids, but he fought his way back into the elite of his profession and took on the rising star, Joe Louis, in 1936. He pummeled the undefeated Louis over twelve rounds before knocking him out. The win did not get Schmeling what he wanted and what he rightfully felt he deserved, a shot at the title, until two years later, after Louis had won it in a series of maneuvers that only boxing could produce, intensified by the growing unease over the political situation in Europe. But he did finally get his return shot in 1938 and, as things turned out, he got the luckiest break of all by losing by knockout in the first round. As Schmeling realized later, had he beaten Louis in the rematch, he almost certainly would never have been able to erase the Nazi taint from his reputation as he did after the war. The Nazis would have lionized him too much.

Joe Louis's story is the rise of an unremarkable black boy who, after discovering that he could box, rose from anonymity to become the most famous black man in the world. Louis was a talented amateur, and when he turned pro in 1934—just one year after a group of black entrepreneurs decided to relaunch black professional baseball with the newly formed Negro Leagues, reinvigorating professional sports in the black community—he was sensational. He knocked out everyone. He was well built, quick-fisted, sullen and nearly illiterate. His black managers cultivated an image quite different from that of Jack Johnson to woo the white public and earn him a shot at the title. Louis never gloated over his white opponents (and virtually all of his opponents were white for most of his career); he was not seen in the company of white women (although he secretly shared many beds with them); he was modest, soft-spoken and agreeable. Yet it was important to his managers that Louis exhibit racial pride and not seem like an Uncle Tom; otherwise, he would lose his black following. Louis spoke proudly of his race, and he enjoyed being around blacks, something Jack Johnson clearly did not. Louis became a cross between Jack Armstrong and John Henry. The white press's coverage of him was, at times, openly and crudely racist, yet on the whole it improved as white reporters got to know him. Louis became well liked and was certainly written about more favorably, if condescendingly at times, than most blacks had been in white newspapers.

Schmeling later realized how lucky he was to have lost to Louis. Otherwise, the Nazis would have lionized him too much for his own good.

Louis's first fight that had international political overtones took place in June 1935 against the Italian boxer Primo Carnera, just as Italy was preparing to invade Ethiopia. His victory over Carnera, who had won the heavyweight championship in 1933 by beating Jack Sharkey and lost it the following year to Max Baer, made him a global hero in the black world. Louis lost to Schmeling in 1936 because he had grown overconfident, recalcitrant and unfocused, and because he had bad technique. He learned his lesson from that defeat and did not suffer one again for another fourteen years. The hottest thing in boxing, Louis revitalized the sport, which was on the verge of losing public interest in the early 1930s because of its mediocre heavyweight division. He not only regenerated white interest but attracted a number of black fans to the sport, a fact apparently not lost on Branch Rickey, the man who signed Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1945. Rickey attended at least one of Louis's championship bouts. Despite his loss in 1936 to Schmeling, Louis was still good business, and the men who ran professional boxing recognized that it was in their interest to permit him to fight for the title, particularly because they feared that if Schmeling fought titleholder Jim Braddock and won, there would be little chance of having Schmeling defend the title in the United States. It was also in the financial interest of Braddock, who saw that he could make much more money fighting Louis than Schmeling, even though Schmeling had beaten Louis. Mike Jacobs, Louis's Jewish promoter (no relation to Joe Jacobs, Schmeling's manager) saw it that way, too, which is why Louis fought for and won the title in 1937. This set the moment for the showdown in 1938.

In 1938, it must be remembered, there were still plenty of white Americans, particularly Southerners, who wanted Louis to lose to Schmeling simply because Schmeling was white, despite the fact that he was a Nazi. Yet something had changed: This time, in an atmosphere very different from Jack Johnson's major title defenses against white fighters, many whites were willing to accept Louis and, even after the fight, to feel that his victory was good for the country. As a result, Louis became the first major crossover sports hero in America, because that is exactly how the white public decided to interpret his victory—as a heroic achievement, virtually a first for a black athlete. This perception was enhanced by Louis's unselfish and patriotic service in the armed forces during the war (although he never saw combat). While in the military, he stood up for the rights and status of the black soldier, including coming to the assistance of Jackie Robinson by helping him get into officers' training school and aiding him when he was court-martialed. There is more about Louis's war record in *Knocking Down Barriers: My Fight for Black America*, the autobiography of Truman Gibson, who was Civilian Aide in the War Department during a good portion of World War II and who became, for a time, Louis's lawyer. Gibson also became a major fight promoter in the 1950s.

Read together, the three books under review offer a rich collective portrait of Louis, Schmeling and the era to which they belonged. Erenberg's *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation* has the keenest sense of how the fight reflected the growing internationalization of sports and the intersection of manhood and politics in American culture at the time. Myler's *Ring of Hate* is the shortest and the simplest of these books, but it's the most perceptive about boxing itself. For instance, he gives the best analysis of Primo Carnera's career and the most persuasive reasons why Carnera's fights weren't fixed of any of the many accounts I have read. And because Carnera is not dismissed, as he typically is, as a tomato can or third-rate opponent, Louis's defeat of him is given its proper importance as an athletic accomplishment. Margolick's *Beyond Glory*—a breathless stew of a narrative that draws considerably upon newspaper accounts published in America, Germany and elsewhere—contains the most in sheer detail, including reconstructed conversations, intricate descriptions of how the principal actors dressed and an especially strong discussion of Schmeling's relationships with

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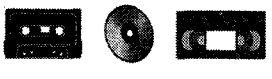

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his Jewish-American and German managers. Yet as thickly detailed as Margolick's book is on the fighters until the moment of their 1938 rematch, it is shockingly thin on their careers subsequent to the big fight. Both Erenberg and Myler are far better on what happened to Louis and Schmeling after their 1938 encounter, which is actually important to the story, as both men met again on several occasions, and as Schmeling used Louis (not without compensation to Louis, as Margolick notes) to rehabilitate his past.

In the end, after the war and after their boxing careers were over, Louis wound up broke and in poor health, while Schmeling, who occasionally lent him money, became rich selling Coca-Cola in West Germany. But both men were probably forever haunted by their two fights: Schmeling knew, after all, that his loss to Louis was the only reason he had any standing at all in America, while Louis knew that beating Schmeling made him a myth rather than a fighter, opening the door for his general acceptance by white America. Each owed the other a lot and one supposes, finally, that each was paid in the coin he knew and needed. ■

Profane Illuminations

DAVID A. BELL

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU: Restless Genius.
By Leo Damrosch. Houghton Mifflin. 556 pp. $30.

VOLTAIRE ALMIGHTY: A Life in Pursuit of Freedom.
By Roger Pearson. Bloomsbury. 447 pp. $35.

Two decades ago, while studying in Paris, I stumbled across the wonderful bookstore of the Libre Pensée ("Free Thought") association. Tucked away in the narrow streets of the Fifth Arrondissement, near where Balzac set *Le Père Goriot*, it seemed a relic of the past: shabby, dim and cluttered, the gentle odor of old book leather hinting at hidden treasures on the shelves. And indeed, most of the books appeared, delightfully, to have come out of an alternate timeline in which the age of Voltaire had never ended. Thick volumes denounced the hidden conspiracies of the Jesuits and chronicled the crimes of the Inquisition. Pamphlets offered concise defenses of Deism. And a rickety postcard stand displayed, alongside the usual images of the Pantheon and the Seine, engravings of the execution of Jean Calas, an eighteenth-century victim of religious bigotry posthumously exonerated through the efforts of Voltaire. One half expected to see the *philosophe* himself browsing quietly at the next shelf.

Back then, in the mid-1980s, La Libre Pensée seemed like nothing more than a pleasant curiosity. After all, the great battles of the Enlightenment had burned out long before. Religious intolerance and fanaticism were no longer matters of major concern. Indeed, for many of my French fellow students, the great enemy was the Enlightenment itself. Every week they would cram into a crowded lecture hall at the Collège de France to hear Michel Foucault, then in the last year of his life, explain how the eighteenth century saw the imprisoning of the Western world in a straitjacket of mental discipline. They struggled to grasp the quicksilver sentences in which Jacques Derrida deconstructed the criteria of rationality and truth that eighteenth-century philosophy had taken as axiomatic. They spoke derisively of an Enlightenment that had culminated not in modern democracy but in Auschwitz.

Today, things look rather different. *Pace* Foucault, enlightened psychiatrists and prison reformers do not seem particularly dangerous compared with suicide bombers and book burners. In the twenty-first century the Enlightenment appears anything but the triumphant imperial "project" denounced by vulgar postmodernists. Its heritage is fragile and endangered. Admittedly, its works remain in the "canon"—but perhaps only because they go largely unread in certain quarters. I sometimes wonder what would happen if, for instance, a public university system asked all entering students to read Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, with its deep, deliberate offensiveness toward Christianity. What if a major studio attempted to film his *Mahomet*, a play far more systematically disparaging of the Prophet than Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*?

If nothing else, though, our own century's retreat from the Enlightenment should help us appreciate that this great movement of ideas has been a fragile thing all along, and never more than in its supposed eighteenth-century heyday. Its swift apparent triumph in the American and French revolutions makes it easy to forget that its greatest authors constantly ran afoul of the authorities and took great personal risks throughout their careers. Both Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as these two excellent new biographies point out, had books officially shredded and burned in Paris—even if, in Voltaire's case, the responsible official surreptitiously substituted another volume at the last minute, so as to take the offending one home for himself. Roger Pearson reminds us that Voltaire served several stints in prison, lived much of his life in exile from his native France and had to have the sheets of his first great work, the *Philosophical Letters*, smuggled into Paris in a furniture cart. Even his most famous patron, Prussia's Frederick the Great, once remarked of him: "I shall have need of him for another year at most, no longer. One squeezes the orange and throws away the peel." As for Rousseau, Leo Damrosch recalls that the threat of prosecution kept him constantly on the move among France, Switzerland and Britain. "I never get a virtuous or useful idea," Rousseau wrote to his patron Malesherbes in 1765, "without seeing the gallows or the scaffold before me."

The remark may seem overly dramatic, even paranoid—and Rousseau very likely did suffer from clinical paranoia in his last years. But consider that in 1766, a 21-year-old nobleman named Jean-François de La Barre was publicly tortured, decapitated and burned in the northern French town of Abbeville for the "crime" of impiety—with the charge proved by nothing more than the fact that he owned a copy of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*. The executioner threw the book onto the funeral pyre next to his victim's head.

How, then, did the Enlightenment manage to survive at all, let alone flourish? To answer this question, historians generally try to locate figures like Voltaire and Rousseau within large-scale cultural shifts. They talk of the general weakening of religious orthodoxy, despite cases like de La Barre's, and the declining ability of the Christian churches to impose beliefs on the supposed faithful. They invoke the vertiginous expansion of the book market,

David A. Bell is Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Johns Hopkins University. His study of total war in the age of Napoleon is forthcoming from Houghton Mifflin.

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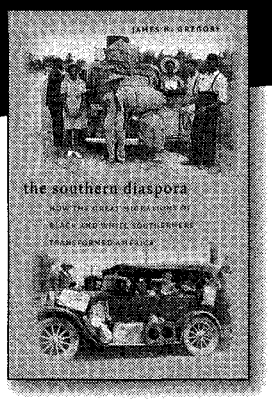

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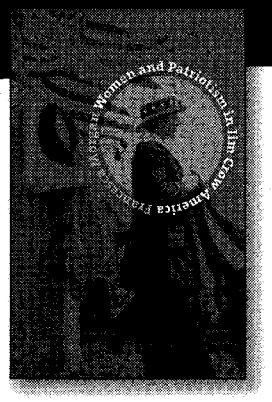

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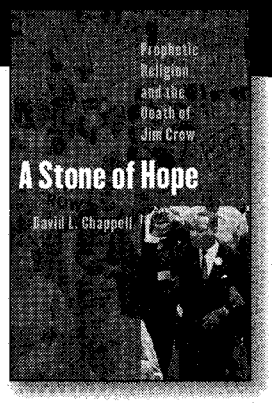

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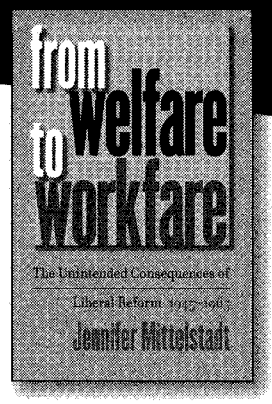

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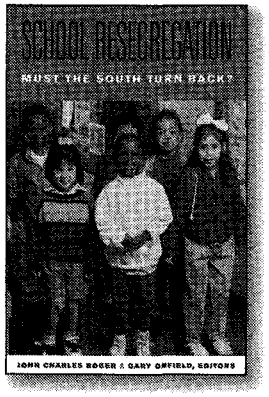

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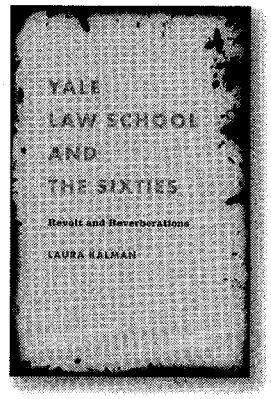

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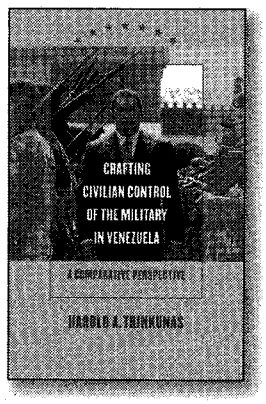

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and the even more vertiginous rise of institutions—lending libraries, coffeehouses, newspapers, reading circles—that brought Enlightenment ideas to the attention of a new reading public. Between them, Voltaire and Rousseau largely invented the phenomenon of the intellectual celebrity, and their resulting popularity, of which even absolute monarchs took heed, gave them a form of protection that unknown figures like de La Barre tragically lacked.

Of course, both men also enjoyed a more traditional form of writers' insurance: aristocratic patronage. Rousseau may have written the century's most eloquent defenses of social equality, but he could never have done so without the money, shelter and protection offered him by the Duke and Duchess of Luxembourg, the Prince de Conti, the Earl Marischal, the Marquis de Girardin and many others. Had Voltaire not made close friends at school with the future Marquis d'Argenson and Duke de Richelieu, his youthful poem accusing France's ruling regent of incest might well have been his last (as it was, the regent had him banished from Paris for it). Historians of late have given particular prominence to female patrons, who transformed intellectual conversation with Enlightenment authors into an art form. In the case of Voltaire's liaison with the Marquise du Châtelet, and Rousseau's with the Countess d'Houdetot, the relationship turned passionate and erotic, although in the latter case it remained unconsummated (both women, incidentally, also took as a lover the aristocratic poet Saint-Lambert; Châtelet died giving birth to his baby).

Neither Pearson nor Damrosch, both literary critics by training, engages extensively with this historical background, and as a result their books give relatively little sense of the Enlightenment as a cultural phenomenon. While both provide exhaustive accounts of the aristocratic patrons, they spend much less time on their subjects' equally important relationships with the common reader. The books chronicle the personal dangers but largely ignore the broader intellectual reactions that the two men provoked, including a smoking lava flow of condemnation from the Christian churches. For that matter, neither Pearson nor Damrosch gives much attention to the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement, or to their subjects' relationships with other thinkers.

Rather, the books offer conventionally framed life stories of two figures who were intellectual colleagues, rivals and ultimately bitter enemies. Pearson takes us through the familiar territory of François-Marie Arouet's 1694 birth in the home of a Paris notary (although his true father was probably a writer of popular songs), his brilliant school career and quick success as a playwright under the name Voltaire, and the early notoriety he earned for his daring *Philosophical Letters*, based on his observations of England. We follow him through his prolific love affairs, his even more prolific travels, his fantastically prolific publications and his unbelievably prolific correspondence, as he transformed himself into the century's grand, totemic intellectual. Living just across the border in Switzerland, Voltaire waged crusade after crusade for freedom of thought, finally returned to Paris for a triumphant visit at age 84 and then, with impeccably theatrical timing, died.

Voltaire drank ass's milk to treat his chronic indigestion. Rousseau, who was obsessed with his penis, used primitive catheters to urinate.

Damrosch, whose biography has been nominated for a National Book Award, begins in 1712 with Rousseau's birth to a Genevan watchmaker father and a mother who died from complications resulting from childbirth. We learn of the man's idiosyncratic early education, his running away from home before his sixteenth birthday, his subsequent picaresque wanderings, his tardy achievement of fame and his writing of some of the most influential works of the century, including *The Discourse on Inequality*, *The Social Contract*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Emile* and the *Confessions*. The book concludes with Rousseau's slide into increasing eccentricity and paranoia, his break with nearly all his former friends and his death, on the gentle grounds of the château of Ermenonville, just five weeks after Voltaire's.

In the classic Anglo-American biographical manner, both books focus heavily on personality, personal relationships and the physical settings (both therefore devote considerable space to the scenery of Switzerland, place of Rousseau's birth and Voltaire's exile). Pearson gives a lavish account of the landscaping and renovations carried out at Voltaire's château in Ferney—even the heating and plumbing ("the sanitary requirements of master, mistress and guests were met by the *chaise percée*... water was heated in a boiler and delivered through lead piping to a tin bath lined with marble"). Damrosch includes photographs of Rousseau's surviving abodes and describes the plaques and street signs that now adorn them. Both authors give lavish attention to clothes, notably the flowingly effeminate Armenian gown Rousseau had made for himself in the early 1760s, to the astonishment of his neighbors, and the velvet-and-ermine housecoat Voltaire wore to keep warm (it cost twice the average workman's yearly wages). Bodily complaints naturally receive detailed treatment as well, particularly since, like nearly everyone in the eighteenth century who survived to middle age, both men suffered from painful chronic ailments. Voltaire had a notoriously weak digestive system, which he could only soothe by drinking ass's milk. Rousseau often found it almost impossible to urinate, relying on primitive catheters that caused frequent infections and terrific discomfort.

Above all, of course, there is sex, in both cases titillatingly irregular, although for Rousseau largely in the head ("D.H. Lawrence used to preach against sex in the head, but that is where Rousseau's sex life nearly always took place," Damrosch comments nicely). Rousseau's urinary affliction obviously contributed to his inactivity on this front, but as Damrosch plausibly suggests, his obsession with his penis probably had psychosomatic origins. Nor did the affliction cause complete impairment. In 1766 the young James Boswell, of all people, seduced Rousseau's longtime companion, Thérèse Levasseur, meticulously recording that they made love thirteen times. "Don't imagine you are a better lover than Rousseau," she chided him, deflatingly. Thérèse, an engaging but barely literate laundress visitors routinely mistook for Rousseau's housekeeper, may have borne as many as five of his children. But in the behavior that has caused his admirers the most pain, the *philosophe* deposited each newborn child at a foundling home, where the dreadful conditions almost certainly killed them.

Curiously, for both men important chapters of their sexual lives involved incest. Rousseau, after running away from Geneva, found a home with the eccentric and beautiful Madame de Warens, whom he called "mother." Three years later the relationship, the most important of Rousseau's life, became amorous. As for Voltaire, after the death of his great love the Marquise du Châtelet, he set up house with his own niece, Madame Denis, and in 1753 made her pregnant, although she miscarried ("would her child have called its fa-

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mous progenitor 'Great Uncle' or just plain 'Papa'?" Pearson asks irreverently). Despite living in this exceptionally fragile glass house, it was Voltaire who revealed the fate of Rousseau's abandoned children in a vicious 1764 pamphlet.

Little of this material is unfamiliar to specialists. Pearson and Damrosch have both drawn principally on their subjects' published works and correspondence, the memoirs of acquaintances and other established sources from the period. Nor does either author pretend to offer dramatically new interpretations. Damrosch, while making persuasively strong claims for Rousseau's radical originality, relies heavily on the earlier work of Jean Starobinski and Arthur Melzer. Pearson closely follows earlier studies as well, particularly by the French Voltaire scholar René Pomeau. Both books, in other words, amount to popular distillations, more than original research.

But popularization was an honorable and important Enlightenment art. Voltaire collaborated with the Marquise du Châtelet on popular expositions of Newton's work, and both he and Rousseau engaged brilliantly with broad general audiences throughout their careers. As popularizations both new biographies succeed marvelously. They provide full, vivid, dramatic and well-informed portraits of their subjects. And by doing so, they remind us of something professional historians of the period all too often forget: If the Enlightenment did in fact survive and flourish, it did so not only because of sweepingly impersonal changes in structures of belief, the book market and institutions of intellectual sociability but because of the actions of some remarkable individual thinkers.

Pearson and Damrosch have also managed to overcome obstacles that have defeated many previous biographers. True, neither Voltaire nor Rousseau presents the sort of problems found in a figure like Shakespeare, who died nearly eighty years before Voltaire's birth, yet on whom we have such little information that biographers must resort again and again to little more than hopeful speculation. The works and correspondence of Voltaire fill hundreds of large, dense volumes, and while Rousseau takes up less shelf space, among his works is the astonishing autobiographical *Confessions*. But the sheer volume of Voltaire's material quickly becomes overwhelming, and Rousseau's *Confessions* mislead as well as inform, reflect their author's creeping paranoia and present the constant dilemma of what to make of episodes for which there exists no independent corroboration. Pearson's and Damrosch's books weigh and distill this daunting source material as well as any concise biographies in English.

The books make clear that despite many surface parallels (the incest, the chronic afflictions, the persecution and exile, the aristocratic patrons), Voltaire and Rousseau were not just remarkable but remarkably different: the Janus faces of the Enlightenment. Voltaire, despite his reputation, became a radical against his own inclinations. Throughout much of his career he longed for nothing more than to ascend the established cultural heights of the Old Regime, particularly membership in the Académie Française and the post of Historiographer Royal (he succeeded in both). He ruled his Swiss domain like a lord of the manor and, in classic aristocratic fashion, treated his life as one long elegant, utterly assured theatrical display. He disdained the poor; and despite his stinging critiques of war, he made a fortune investing in military contracting. His hatred of established religion bled into a vicious anti-Semitism that went far beyond the Orientalism-tinged anticlericalism of his play *Mahomet* (itself mostly meant as a covert attack on the Catholic church, and understood as such at the time). He was insufferably vain. "It is not enough for him to be the hero of the century," wrote his disciple La Harpe (in a passage quoted by Damrosch, not Pearson). "He wants to be the news of the day, for he knows that the news of the day often makes people forget the hero of the century."

Voltaire called Rousseau 'artificial from head to foot, in mind and in soul,' words that caused his disciple 'the most grievous hurt.'

Pearson acknowledges all these points—with the exception, perplexingly, of the anti-Semitism. And he admits that Voltaire was not really an original thinker. But he compellingly argues that the man's very lust for fame, tied to a basic sense of justice, led him into the fray, again and again, against intolerance and fanaticism, most notably in the campaign to exonerate Jean Calas. It also led him to employ his wonderfully powerful wit in an unending flow of essays, histories and philosophical tales (especially *Candide*) that brought the Enlightenment credo of tolerance and rationality to an entire continent of readers.

Rousseau, though no amateur when it came to vanity, could not have been more different. Neither a brilliant student nor an artistic prodigy, he struggled for decades before making his reputation. Damrosch plausibly suggests that he suffered from dyslexia, which forced him to read very slowly but also, perhaps, with unusual concentration and intensity. Although capable of great charm, he usually felt ill at ease in social situations and ostentatiously scorned the sort of glittering positions Voltaire so avidly sought, for fear of ending up in a situation of dependence. Eventually he broke with society altogether and decided to live the life of a modern hermit (in truth, a rather coddled hermit). He gave sincerity the place of honor among the virtues and longed for what Jean Starobinski famously called "transparent" relations between people, unobscured by deceitful appearances. He praised simple sentiment above complex reasoning and called religion a matter of feeling, not intellection. From his condemnations of the hypocrisy and corruption of society stem two centuries of radical critique.

Many others had made such critiques before, in the religious language Rousseau could not help echoing. What gave his version such immense power and originality was the way he tied it to the modern concepts of social and personal development. Most of the *philosophes*, including Voltaire, saw both sorts of development as a simple matter of overcoming ignorance and barbarity. In this view, as both individuals and societies grow older, they learn manners and refinement, adopt more rational forms of behavior and put behind them the willfulness, violence and ignorance of earlier stages of growth. These stages themselves—infancy or "primitive" society—have little inherent interest. Rousseau, by contrast, articulated the quintessentially modern idea that these stages have a formative influence on what follows. As societies develop so does mutual dependence, and with it exploitation, inequality, insincerity and unhappiness. Meanwhile, as children develop into adults, significant influences and relationships determine enduring patterns of behavior. Of Rousseau's great works, *The Discourse on Inequality* and the *Confessions* provide classic diagnoses of social and personal development, and the origins of what we would now term collective and individual pathologies. *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, both published in 1762, offer conjectural blueprints on how to avoid these pathologies: how one might go about creating a just society, or raising an unalienated "natural" individual.

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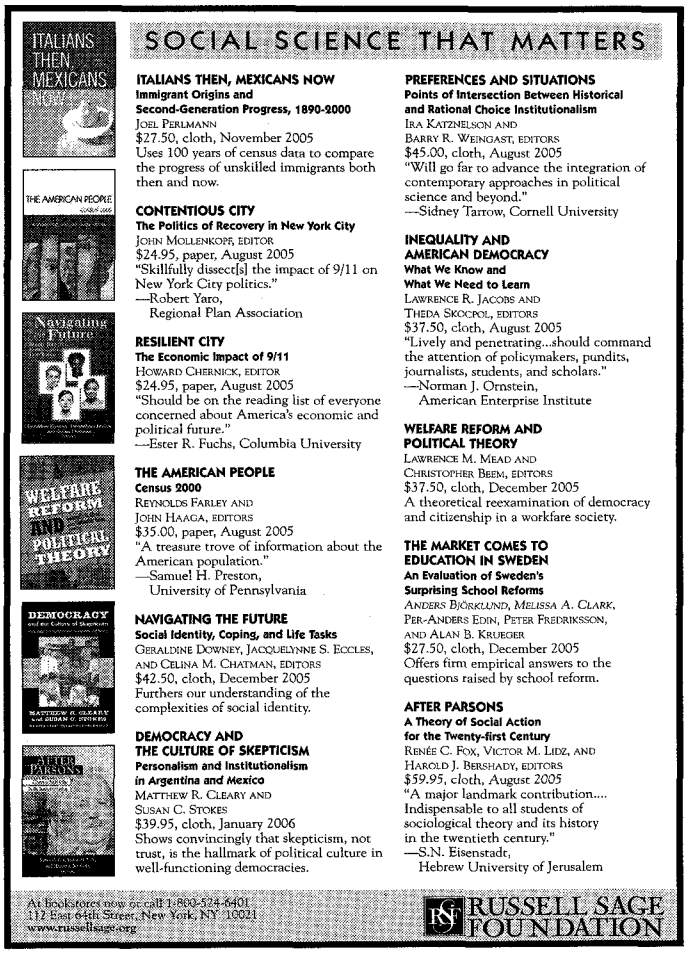
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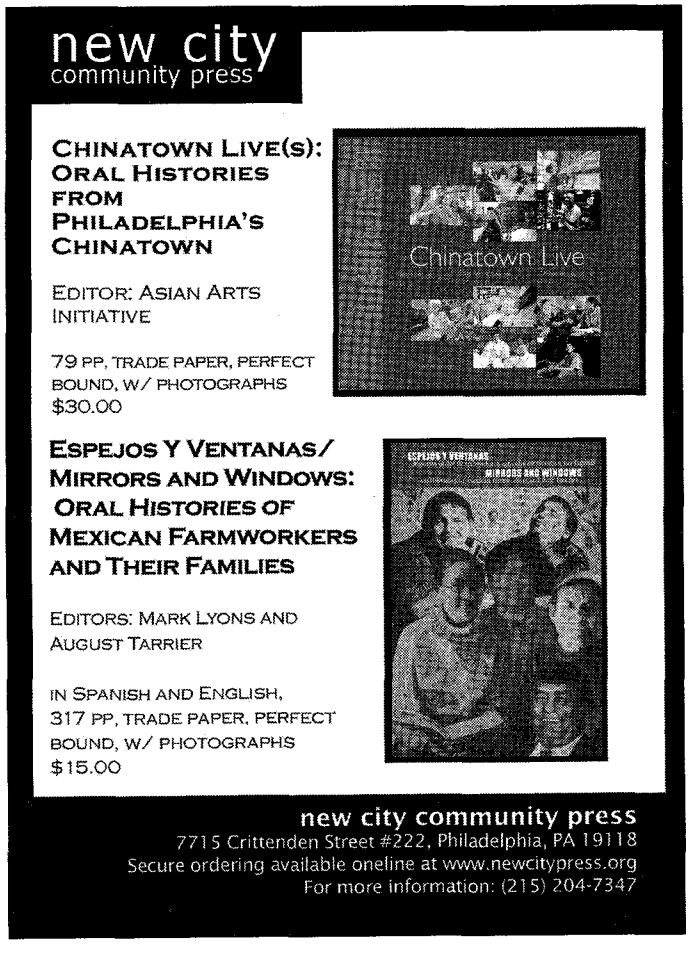
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between Voltaire and Rousseau on the subject of development, consider the way the two dealt with what modern readers would consider the most painfully formative of youthful experiences: sexual molestation. Voltaire, we learn from Pearson, once casually remarked to the mother of Alexander Pope that "if he suffered such constant ill health...it was because he had been repeatedly sodomized at school." However, he otherwise said nothing about the experience and apparently did not consider it very significant. In the only autobiographical sketch he ever wrote, he dismissed the very idea of its significance: "Nothing is more insipid than the details of infancy and the time spent at school" (again, a statement quoted by Damrosch, not Pearson). By contrast, in a famous episode in the *Confessions*, Rousseau recounted how a fellow lodger at a Catholic hospice tried to seduce him, and he did not flinch from a single detail: the odor of chewing tobacco, the filthy groping hands, even the sudden spurt of something "sticky and whitish." Precisely through the vivid analysis of such "details of infancy," and the realization that they constitute foundation stones of the adult personality, the *Confessions* virtually created the genre of modern autobiography, and the narrative still stands as one of the greatest, most penetratingly introspective self-portraits ever written.

Not surprisingly, given these differences, the two men ended up loathing each other. Voltaire, characteristically, deprecated Rousseau with witty elegance: "That man is artificial from head to foot, in mind and in soul"; "He is like a child who thinks he has done something impressive when he blows soap bubbles or makes ripples by spitting into a well." Only when Voltaire got truly annoyed did he stoop to calling Rousseau a "*Jeanfoutre*" (Jean-fuck) and urge that he be hanged. Rousseau, meanwhile, quite typically expressed his own dissatisfaction in more psychological language: "I do not like you, sir. You have chosen to wrong me in the ways that would cause me the most grievous hurt, and I your disciple and enthusiastic admirer.... I hate you as one who could more worthily have loved you, had you but wished it." It's worth noting that Voltaire loathed the novel, that most introspective of modern art forms, while Rousseau wrote the most popular novel of the century: *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

Pearson and Damrosch succeed so well in conveying these points because, like their subjects, they both understand the importance of style. Damrosch, who gives an excellent précis of Rousseau's ideas, settles mostly for a brisk, pleasantly dry tone. Still, he can turn wryly ironic on occasion—such as when contrasting Rousseau's unceasing belief in his imminent demise (he was the century's champion hypochondriac) with the abundant evidence of his generally robust health (penis aside). Damrosch also has a brilliant eye for quotations, and he sprinkles them through the book to great effect. For instance, Rousseau's comment to Malesherbes on the gallows, or David Hume's marvelous verdict on Rousseau's increasing paranoia: "He is plainly mad, after having long been maddish." Or Rousseau himself, creepily expressing this madness: "The ceiling above me has eyes, the walls around me have ears. [I am] surrounded by spies and by malevolent, vigilant watchers."

Pearson, who has less to say about his subject's less original ideas, has greater stylistic ambitions. He shifts between cinematic evocations of the setting ("the clatter of wheel on cobble, the crack of whip and driver's curse, the hawker's cry and the policeman's halloo") and passages that echo Voltaire's style. The chapter titles come straight out of *Candide*, which Pearson has previously translated (e.g., "How the lawyers had themselves a lovely holocaust, and how two cuckolds turned a blind eye"). Sometimes,

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Pearson strives too hard for effect, as with the stale trick of calling Voltaire by different names to underline his shifting identities: "Voltaire," "François," the family name "Arouet," even the toddler nickname "Zozo." Pearson speaks twice of Frederick the Great's "bitchiness," when once would have been too much. But when he hits his stride he can be magnificent, as in his description of how Voltaire read Rousseau's assertion that the splendor of dawn in the mountains demonstrates the existence of God. "Let's see if Rousseau was right," he announced to a sleepy houseguest in the middle of the night, and bundled the man out the door for a two-hour journey to the top of a hill:

> The Jura mountains rose before them, the dark green tips of their trees etched against the pale blue light of morning, while below their feet a landscape of meadow and stream began to emerge from the crepuscular blur. And there, on the far horizon, among the pine-clad peaks, the sun rose in a vast semicircle of purple fire. Resplendent. Incontrovertible. Voltaire removed his hat and prostrated himself on the ground. Thus prone...he improvised a quasi-poetic chant of worship: "I believe. I believe in You. Almighty God, I believe." Whereupon he got to his feet, replaced his hat, and dusted the dirt from his elegant breeches...and added: "As for Monsieur, the son, and Madame, his mother, that is quite another matter."

The episode may never have taken place, but if it didn't, it should have.

Both books end, not surprisingly, in the same place: the Paris Panthéon, just a few blocks from La Libre Pensée, where the French Revolutionaries transferred both Voltaire's and Rousseau's bodies, and where the two men now lie in an austere neoclassical crypt, just a few feet from each other. Damrosch comments on the irony of this juxtaposition (both men must be spinning madly in protest at the other's presence), but neither biographer discusses its broader, unintended symbolism. The Revolutionaries, of course, in transferring the two bodies to this shrine of "the great men of the fatherland," meant simply to signify the triumph of the Enlightenment, which they associated with their own political movement. And the authors undoubtedly deserved their status as the Enlightenment's two principal French representatives: They came out of the same "enlightened" coterie of friends, contributed to the same "enlightened" projects, shared the same basic epistemological assumptions.

But in Jean-Jacques Rousseau the great critical glare of the Enlightenment, which Voltaire had fixed so scorchingly on prejudice and superstition and intolerance, was turned on itself. Critique became auto-critique, and crusade shifted into introspection. Not surprisingly, nearly all the early enemies of the Enlightenment ended up being influenced by Rousseau, often despite themselves: Romantic poets, embryonic socialists, even ultra-Catholic defenders of throne and altars (for did not the mountains at dawn proclaim the existence of God?). Even today, often without knowing it, the enemies of the Enlightenment echo him. The critique of Western civilization that Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit call "Occidentalism," which they find shared by everyone from the Nazis to Al Qaeda, is to a great extent a perversion of Rousseauism. The notion of the Enlightenment as cold, mechanistic, materialistic, instrumental, overly rational, devoid of sentiment or sincerity or religious feeling: All this, we owe to him. The critique, sharp and stinging, has been there from the very start. Is it any wonder, then, that the Enlightenment has been such a fragile thing? ■

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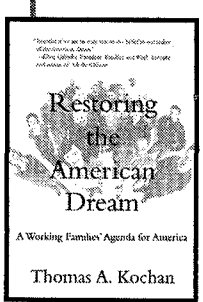

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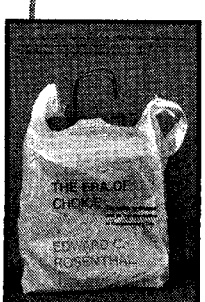

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Monster's Ball

JOHN BANVILLE

PARTY IN THE BLITZ: The English Years.
By Elias Canetti. Translated by Michael Hofmann. New Directions. 249 pp. $22.95.

This is the fourth and final volume of Elias Canetti's memoirs. Its predecessors, *The Tongue Set Free* (1977), *The Torch in My Ear* (1980) and *The Play of the Eyes* (1985), were poised, richly detailed and slightly dull; *Party in the Blitz* is chaotic, repetitive and horribly fascinating. It was a huge and scandalous success when it was published in the original German in 2003, some nine years after the author's death. The question has been raised as to whether it should have been published at all. Canetti was a scrupulous craftsman, and Jeremy Adler's somewhat uneasy observation, in an afterword to the book, that "Canetti would no doubt have wanted to give the work a more polished form" is surely a large understatement.

Canetti, who won the Nobel Prize in 1981, began to assemble *Party im Blitz: Die englischen Jahre* from his notes and diaries in 1990, when he was 85 and living in Zurich, where he had moved from London ten years earlier. He continued work on the book right up to his death, dictating to his daughter Johanna from a shorthand manuscript. Despite Johanna Canetti's devoted care for the text and the labors of Florindo Tarreghetta, whom Ms. Canetti commissioned to transcribe three separate manuscripts, the book is plainly the work of an old man in a hurry. Adler, one of Canetti's circle, noting that in *Party in the Blitz* the "Olympian calm and the self-censorship of the previous autobiography is set aside for a manner altogether more spirited," is again indulging in demure restraint; for "spirited," read "incandescent." Canetti the avenger is here treating himself to a dish that is steaming hot.

Elias Canetti was born in 1905 in the town of Ruschuk on the lower Danube. It might be said that from the cradle he was a cosmopolitan, despite the fact that for Ruschuk the rest of the world was known as "Europe" and anyone traveling up the Danube to Vienna was said to have "gone to Europe." In *The Tongue Set Free* Canetti writes that

> if I say that Ruschuk is in Bulgaria, then I am giving an inadequate picture of it. For people of the most varied backgrounds lived there, on any one day you could hear seven or eight languages. Aside from the Bulgarians, who often came from the countryside, there were many Turks, who lived in their own neighborhood, and next to it was the neighborhood of the Sephardim, the Spanish Jews—our neighborhood. There were Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, Gypsies. From the opposite side of the Danube came Rumanians.... There were also Russians here and there.

Although German was the main language of the Canetti home—both of Elias's parents had been educated in Vienna—the Sephardic Jews spoke Ladino, a version of Spanish that had hardly changed over the centuries since the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. With "naïve arrogance," as Canetti writes, the Sephardim looked down on their co-religionists, especially the Todesco, or Ashkenazi Jews.

In the early chapters of *The Tongue Set Free* Canetti wonderfully conjures up the strange world in which he grew up. That world was quickly lost—he was 5 when his father moved the family to Manchester, of all places. Two of Elias's maternal uncles had a business going in England, and when one of them died the surviving brother offered Canetti *père* a partnership. "For my parents," Canetti writes, "this was a desirable opportunity to free themselves from Ruschuk, which was too confining and too Oriental for them, and from the far more confining tyranny of the grandfather." The latter is a lowering presence in Canetti's account of his earliest years, as he sits at the head of the table reading aloud from the Haggadah, the story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, "with his sharp face like a bird of prey," watching over the family with an all-seeing, Jehovic eye. The move to England infuriated the old man, and on the day of departure he solemnly and publicly cursed his son.

The patriarch's curse was to prove powerful: Within two years of taking up the partnership in Manchester, Canetti's father was dead, at the age of 30. It was a devastating blow to the family, and for the son a loss from which he never recovered: "My father's death was at the center of every world I found myself in." For nearly a quarter of a century Canetti's mother kept the true circumstances of his father's death from him. After the first year in England she had fallen ill, and a cure at an Austrian spa was prescribed. At the spa she met a doctor who fell in love with her and urged her to leave her husband. When she returned to Manchester she told her husband of the doctor's proposal. He refused to believe the liaison had been as pure as she claimed and flew into a jealous fury, swearing he would not speak another word to her. In the morning, at the silent breakfast table, he suffered a heart attack and died.

It would be tendentious at the least to suggest a direct link between this early tragedy and the grown-up Canetti's extremely complicated and secretive love life. Yet in *The Tongue Set Free* Canetti acknowledges the strong similarities between himself and his mother, who looked upon her contentious relatives with a coolly observant and at times scornful eye—her brothers' greed "had led them to destroy one another in years of litigation"—but who yet took great pride in her family.

> Much later, I came to realize that I, translated to the greater dimensions of mankind [!], am exactly as she was. I have spent the best part of my life figuring out the wiles of man as he appears in the historical civilizations. I have examined and analyzed power as ruthlessly as my mother her family's litigations. There is almost nothing bad that I couldn't say about humans and humankind. And yet my pride in them is so great that there is only one thing I really hate: their enemy, death.

Canetti ends the third volume of his autobiography, *The Play of the Eyes*, with a tender account of his mother's death in Paris and of his brother Georg's grief at her loss. That was in the summer of 1937. By then Canetti was married—his wife, Veza, was a writer whose novels achieved posthumous fame in the 1990s—and had published the work for which he is still best-known, the novel *Auto-da-Fé*. The book, a bleak study of obsession and the pursuit of power, achieved scant success, appearing as it did in the middle of the 1930s, that low decade. Thomas Mann, pleading lack of time and strength, had sent the manuscript back unread, although when it was published Robert Musil congratulated Canetti on his "great

John Banville is the author, most recently, of The Sea, *which won this year's Man Booker Prize.*

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success," a compliment that "almost made me reel."

Canetti and Veza moved to England in 1939 and settled in Hampstead, described by Jeremy Adler as "a former village on the hilly ground in the north of London that had provided a gathering place for artists and intellectuals for more than two centuries." By the early 1940s there were 25,000 "aliens" living in Hampstead, almost half the population of the area. Freud had lived there, and in Canetti's time the residents included the playwright Ernst Toller and the painter Oskar Kokoschka—Canetti relates a grotesquely comic vignette in which Kokoschka claims in all seriousness that he was to blame for the war, since he and Hitler, the would-be painter, had competed for the same scholarship from the Viennese Academy and he had won, thus driving Hitler into politics; such is the solipsism of the artist.

Party in the Blitz opens with a typically condensed and richly allusive meditation on the decline of the English character. The first page records the author's disenchantment after 1945—"no sooner had the War been won, the victory celebrations, the bonfires on the Heath, than the collapse began"—and then flits back in time to the Glorious Revolution and the Thirty Years' War, to Shakespeare and Milton, to Hobbes and Sir Thomas Browne and John Aubrey, the latter one of Canetti's particular heroes, and on whose *Brief Lives* his own *Party in the Blitz* is modeled. Then the page turns and immediately a knife is plunged into the bony breast of T.S. Eliot, "this miserable creature" who

> kowtows to any order that's sufficiently venerable; tries to stifle any élan; a libertine of the void, a foothill of Hegel, a desecrator of Dante (to which Circle would Dante have banished him?); thin lipped, cold hearted, prematurely old, unworthy of Blake or of Goethe or of anything volcanic—his own lava cooled before it ever warmed—neither cat nor bird nor beetle, much less mole, godly, dispatched to England...armed with critical points instead of teeth, tormented by a nymphomaniac of a wife—that was his only excuse—tormented to such a degree that my *Auto da Fé* would have shrivelled up if he had gone near it.

Now, this is not the tone to which we are accustomed in the memoirs of Nobel laureates in the winter of their years. But Canetti, the "godmonster of Hampstead," as the critic John Bayley called him—not without personal cause—was not your usual literary man. He had a fierce belief in his own worth, a belief he sought to instill in those who were sucked into the vortex of his will. He was a slave to love—during the war years he seems to have had three or four affairs going simultaneously—but made slaves of his lovers. The most famous of these was the novelist Iris Murdoch, to whom he had been introduced by his friend and Murdoch's then lover, the expatriate poet and scholar Franz Steiner. Steiner had died in November 1952, and on Christmas Day Canetti telephoned Murdoch and invited her to come to see him in Hampstead. They went to a pub, then back to his flat and sat up talking into the early hours, when he reluctantly called her a taxi. Within days they had begun a love affair they kept so secret that at the time of Murdoch's death in 1999 many of her close friends were still ignorant of it.

A couple of weeks after that Christmas Day meeting, Murdoch wrote:

> It is midnight. [Canetti] was here for five hours. He fills me with wonder and delight and fear. I told him: you are a great city of which I am learning now the main thoroughfares, which roads lead to the river. Later I shall explore each quarter carefully. He said: will you ask for any changes? Do you approve of the cathedral? And what will you do with this city? Live in it.

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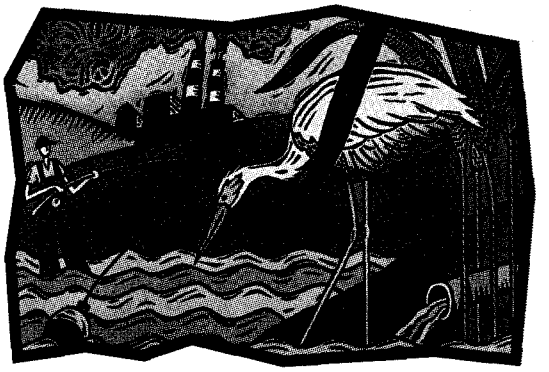

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The affair seems to have had a strong whiff of sadomasochism to it. Murdoch was both fascinated and fearful of this "egoarch," as James Joyce would have called him. She portrayed him as the mysterious tycoon Mischa Fox in her novel *The Flight From the Enchanter*, the title of which carries an obvious significance—another of his lovers, Friedl Benedikt, wrote a novel called simply *The Monster*—and in which we glimpse the side of Canetti that is frequently on display in *Party in the Blitz*.

After three years Murdoch made her own flight from the enchanter, when she met and fell in love with John Bayley, whom she would eventually marry despite Canetti's opposition, and with whom she lived for the rest of her life. In *Party in the Blitz* Canetti exacts his vengeance on her. "Everything I despise about English life is in her," he declares. His portrait of her, though "caricature" is surely a better word, fairly seethes with venom and bile. He scorns everything from her enthusiasms for Sartre and Heidegger to the diaphanous blouse she wears to a meeting with Canetti and his friend the aristocratic Aymer Maxwell. He describes in detail the circumstances of their love-making—"she had things on that didn't have anything remotely to do with love, it was all woollen and ungainly"—and, even worse, he is dismissive of her gift:

> Iris is what I would call an "illegitimate" writer. She never suffered from having to write. There was always something schoolgirl-like about her, even after twenty-four novels, and if not schoolgirl-like, then schoolmarmish, which in a writer is even worse.

It is a pity that *Party in the Blitz* should stand as Canetti's last word. He was, in his way, a great figure, one of the last of those omnivorous intellects produced by Old Europe in its dying decades before the catastrophe of World War II. If *Auto-da-Fé* is more impressive than satisfying, Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, which grew out of the disastrous politics of the 1930s, will surely survive. For all the cruelty of his late judgments on those he loved and those who loved him, it is well to heed the warning of Murdoch's biographer Peter Conradi: "Those wishing to honour Iris's reputation must fight the temptation to blacken Canetti's." ■

I Act, Therefore I Am

DAVID THOMSON

OLIVIER.
By Terry Coleman. Henry Holt. 595 pp. $32.50.

Sixteen years after Laurence Olivier's death, here is the official biography, initiated by his widow, Joan Plowright, supported by his children and by a writer with access to a mass of private correspondence. Already reviewed in London, *Olivier* has come in for some heavy attacks, notably from Anthony Holden, the author of an unofficial Olivier biography and a writer well versed in show business material. Terry Coleman is not experienced with theatrical subjects. His best-known books concern forms of transportation and the life and legend of Horatio Nelson (a role played by Olivier in *That Hamilton Woman*, his happiest work with Vivien Leigh, and a crowd-pleaser in time of war).

It is part of the general complaint that Coleman has not evoked the sense of danger in so many Olivier performances. (Time and again, the actor chose leaps and falls that seemed perilous.) Holden also claims that Coleman has obdurately refused to credit widespread stories about Olivier's bisexuality, notably his connection with Danny Kaye. Finally, some say, Olivier was much more of a scoundrel than his official biographer is willing to acknowledge.

Don't be too alarmed in advance. The marauding nature of Olivier's private life is clear—indeed, it's hard to think of a book that so carefully traces the need for topped-up sexual reassurance in a lifetime of acting. That alone is enough to persuade us of the truth of Alec Guinness's barbed funeral tribute—"Larry always carried the threat of danger with him; primarily as an actor but also, for all his charm, as a private man. There were times when it was wise to be wary of him." You may deduce from that observation how much easier it was for strangers to worship Olivier than for those who worked with him. George Devine, for years leader of the Royal Court Theatre and the man who had launched Joan Plowright's career, told the young actress as she fell in love with the master, "Marry him if you must, but don't act with him too often, or he will destroy you."

No one knew that remorseless competitiveness better than Vivien Leigh. It is the orthodoxy these days that she is the dictionary's illustration next to "self-destruction"—tubercular, alcoholic, manic-depressive, nymphomaniacal, desperately spoiled. Not to mention beautiful, enchanting and very funny at the drop of her own knickers. (Shortly after getting to America, the dulcet snob declared, "I do not think there is anything nice about America except the football and the politeness of men in garages." It's Blanche DuBois ahead of her time.) Leigh was also unlucky in that she drove Olivier mad with lust (she was always "Pussey" to him) and at times outstripped him in show business success. His creeping revenge may be the worst evidence against him as a person.

Yet Coleman is smart enough to give us Olivier's Archie Rice in *The Entertainer* as seen through the hurt gaze of Vivien. The play's author, John Osborne, saw this:

> One Saturday run-through...he [Olivier] sprang his first realised version of the scene in which Archie sings the blues and crumples slowly down the side of the proscenium arch. The spring sunshine and the noise of the Sloane Square traffic poured through the open door. A dozen of us watched, astounded. Vivien turned her head towards me. She was weeping. I immediately thought of the chill inflection in Olivier's Archie voice, "I wish women wouldn't cry. I wish they wouldn't."

Most English people who were alive in Olivier's time have their Olivier stories and their moments. As an admiring teenager I had seen him do what seemed grand things in the traditional vein—his films of *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Richard III*, all playing to more people than had ever seen the plays. I had seen the lurid Peter Brook *Titus Andronicus* onstage and been too young to distinguish Hammer horror from genuine tragedy. But *The Entertainer* was something else. I'm not sure now whether it's a good play, but Osborne—a talented but malicious man, and not unlike Olivier—had been intrigued and stung by Olivier's casual (if not reckless) wondering whether Osborne could write anything for him.

David Thomson is the author of The Whole Equation: A History of Hollywood *and* The New Biographical Dictionary of Film, *both published by Knopf. He lives in San Francisco.*

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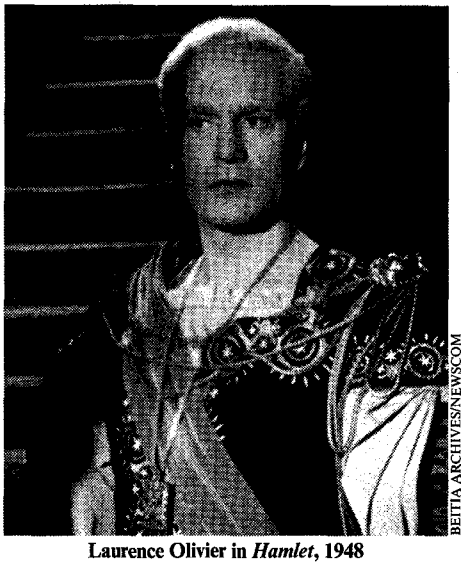
Osborne at the Royal Court had meant *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. In fact, Olivier—a risk-taker but a settled Tory in matters of stage taste—had not thought much of it. It was Arthur Miller's response that alerted him to something new, and Olivier could smell a threat to his supremacy like a cat sniffing cod. And so Osborne, in effect, had met challenge with challenge: See if the great man of the English stage can play a sleazy music-hall opportunist.

The Royal Court was a small theater, and from the moment Olivier came on it was clear that an insidiously intimate transformation was in the making. Somehow or other—from observing real figures in the dying art of music hall, from his friendship with comedian Danny Kaye or from his sinister self—Olivier had created in Archie Rice a Falstaff in whom dead patter and sly innuendo had smothered heart. The man was craven, wretched, in decay: England in the sour mood of Suez. Olivier made him mesmerizing. The hatefulness was seductive. The tangle in the actor's urge to be loved and loathed at the same time was as naked and noxious as his own body undergoing autopsy. All of a sudden, Sir Laurence had become like Brando or Dean. He was our rat, as well as our king.

It's not clear how many of Olivier's acts Coleman managed to catch. He doesn't make his own role as spectator vivid in this book. He recites the most important reviews, a method that runs a risk of letting the challenging works seem automatic, or just one thing after another. But then he gives us Vivien Leigh at the rehearsal for *The Entertainer*—the most understanding yet the most violently distressed spectator Olivier ever had—and he has her crying, as if the rat was meant to frighten her above all. And perhaps it was. I still recall the foul intimacy with which Archie chatted to the audience in *The Entertainer*—yes, it's in the play, or at least it was once Olivier found it as the perfect, dreadful voice, that of self-pity used to prod at our hidden wounds.

There are moments in an actor's history when he establishes a bond with his audience that is like infection. And Olivier did it with Archie Rice. It was a role that came at the hinge of his life, when "Sir" was on his way to becoming "Lord"; when Vivien Leigh was about to be replaced by Joan Plowright; and as his command of the British imagination took on the National Theatre. In a matter of months, Olivier adopted a play, a playwright and political ideas he had not esteemed before, and pierced the English imagination. I can still hear his poisoned sigh—"I do my best, don't I?"—full of the dread that the best onstage was just a cheap trick. Olivier taught generations what acting could be—and he left us uneasy. Coleman's coolness and detachment establish that uneasiness without crushing the man. Olivier was so anxious to act that he could live in tatters—incomplete, inconsistent, as fickle as the wind, perpetually exhausted and self-dramatizingly evasive for anyone capable of love or loyalty. But given the right role—Henry V onscreen, or head of the National Theatre in life—he could alter the cultural compass of a nation.



BETTMANN ARCHIVE/NEWSCOM

Laurence Olivier in *Hamlet*, 1948

Olivier was the son of a clergyman, born just south of London in Dorking, in 1907. The family life was not happy, and though Larry often liked to be the English gent, he was the sort of cleric's son who might end up in the divorce courts and worse. He had a lovely singing voice; he was kept from real beauty as a child only by the brutal ambition of his face; and he excelled in girls' roles in school. He had a great year at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. He became lean, gaunt and utterly handsome, often with a Ronald Colman mustache. In 1930 Noël Coward gave him a breakthrough role, personal friendship and maybe more in *Private Lives*, and by 1931 Olivier was performing that hit play in New York and very alert to Hollywood offers.

Coleman stresses that at this point in his life, Olivier had done precious little of Shakespeare or the classics. He was a modern actor, plainly aiming at the movies. He was also married to a young actress, Jill Esmond, who would turn out to have stronger lesbian tendencies. Coleman is pretty sure that Olivier himself had had a couple of homosexual affairs, though he has reason to argue that they were climatic or fashionable more than heartfelt. Still, in 1933 Olivier did a play called *The Green Bay Tree* in New York, under the famously cruel direction of Jed Harris. Coleman sees it as an important failure for Olivier, coupled with Garbo's inability to feel aroused by Olivier onscreen. But he might have gone further with *The Green Bay Tree*. A long interview exists, with Dick Cavett talking to the elderly but precise Harris, in which the director relived the climax of that play—about a young man kept as a gay lover and too weak to establish a heterosexual life—and made it pretty clear that he reckoned he was eating into Olivier's rather feeble, vain soul. (No wonder, decades later, that Olivier modeled his Richard III on Harris.)

What happened next is crucial. A young husband and father, but unhappy in both parts, Olivier went back to England and after a time of dismay and muddle accepted the invitation of John Gielgud to do *Romeo and Juliet*, with the two of them swapping the roles of Romeo and Mercutio (Peggy Ashcroft was Juliet). This is the point to draw attention to an astonishing generation of English actors, a phenomenon that Coleman might have explored more fully. Olivier and Ashcroft were born in 1907, Gielgud in 1904, Ralph Richardson in 1902, Michael Redgrave in 1908, Alec Guinness in 1914. Is that chance, or was there something in the social collapse after 1918 that left holes for a new acting style to emerge? It's an important background, just as the group fed on their friendships and rivalries. Coleman is excellent at describing the chummy unease and the loving reserve that existed among Olivier, Gielgud and Richardson.

But Gielgud had redirected the animal accuracy and daring of Olivier, even as he rather envied it. Gielgud saw earlier than most that in their contest he was the great fluting voice, essentially old-fashioned, while Olivier was a physical confrontation. By 1937 Olivier was doing *Hamlet*, *Henry V* and *Twelfth Night* (Sir Toby Belch) at the Old Vic—and by 1937 he was wildly in love with the 24-year-old Vivien Leigh.

For more than twenty years every loving couple in Britain thought of Larry and Viv as examples, and knew nothing of how perfect romance was tearing the two of them to pieces. Coleman gives a fair and deeply painful portrait of the marriage, and by implication he suggests the rather hysterical romantic energy with which Olivier embarked on the affair, as if to settle in his own mind the kind of man he was. Coleman has had access to the love letters, and they are of the kind that could make anyone suspicious of love. They also suggest a couple most in love when separated.

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Everything seemed to go swimmingly. No matter that they both gave up spouse and child to be together. They were on screen in *Fire Over England*; she was Ophelia to his Hamlet, playing at Elsinore itself. Then Hollywood swept them up at almost the same time. Olivier had gone there to play Heathcliff in William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (produced by Sam Goldwyn), and Leigh came along soon after—to be with him, for sure, but also with a plan to get the great role of Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind*. Even there, I suspect, there was more competitiveness than Coleman allows. The people who knew Leigh and Olivier then in America were all certain he was taken aback and piqued when Scarlett's glory left Heathcliff out on the moors.

Olivier was not just the older and the more experienced. He was far more of an actor. To the end of her days Leigh had a narrow range, while Olivier knew no challenge beyond him. In this period, for instance, he had also been Iago to Richardson's Othello (startling Ralph with a full-mouthed kiss), he would be Sergius in *Arms and the Man*, Richard III and then, in 1946, either side of the interval, Oedipus and Mr. Puff in *The Critic*. Versatility was his forte, his being nearly; he had built up the theory that with the right nose (false), the proper walk and costume, he could work his way from the outside in with any part. In just a few years' time, this would stand as a vital contrast to American method acting, which was to find inner resemblance and work outward. (One consequence of this is the famous clash with Dustin Hoffman on the set of *Marathon Man*, where Olivier—pretending to be a Nazi dentist—grew weary of Hoffman's labored reachings for someone very like Hoffman himself and urged, "Try acting!")

Leigh was always Vivien. Her prettiness was sacred to her, and she could hardly do without her Belgravia accent. But sometimes she moved people to the depth of their being—twice with Southern belles Scarlett O'Hara and Blanche DuBois. Coleman does not take sides, and he quotes many people—notably Noël Coward ("If he can succeed in breaking away, good luck to him")—to the effect that Larry and Vivien were killing each other, first with love and then with bitterness. She got the first Oscar. Her stardom eclipsed his. And he did not like the adjustment. There were later times—notably in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth* (in the 1950s)—when he acted her off the stage and seemed driven by that intent. She fell ill. She went mad—with such heartfelt players it is tormentingly hard to judge where that act becomes a matter of clinical danger. In doing *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she may have been taken over by her deranged character. But the irony of that was terrible. For Olivier's whole devotion to acting was to claim or hope for such abandonment, no matter that he was too selfish and calculating ever to lose touch with Larry. But he probably hated his own doggedness.

In searching out people who knew the couple, Coleman has found Peter Hiley (a kind of manager), who makes this penetrating suggestion:

> As a man [Larry] was very light. Vivien was not light in that way at all. From one room to another he could switch his temperament. This is one of the actor's great talents. He treated serious things very lightly.... He was not a deep man. Vivien was a very strong woman, very intelligent, very streetwise, very generous. Larry was not really interested in people.... He would observe someone, thinking that would make a good something for Shylock, but he was picking up mannerisms.

Their years of hell have been done before (expect a musical soon—it's a Sondheim subject—*Curtains*?), but Coleman never flinches from his terrible duty. They were both by then such expert scene-makers as to know just how to wound each other. She was tireless until she collapsed, insisting on relentless all-night parties at which guests were virtual prisoners; and he—it is plain—had a stamina for work and staying up late that matched hers. She fucked Peter Finch and had breakdowns. He slept around but never turned a hair. He got his Oscar (for *Hamlet*), his knighthood and even a cigarette named after him (with royalties too).

She was ruined as a person and an actress by the late 1950s—her later films are not very good. And Olivier? Well, the remarkable thing about his titanic life is that in some ways the most important things were waiting for age and the gradual shift from greed to sadness. He went for a divorce. He married Joan Plowright (born in 1929). He had a second generation of children. And he had Archie Rice, Astrov in *Uncle Vanya*, his Othello of the 1960s (he had killed the suggestion of getting Paul Robeson—"One rather wants to have a bash oneself"—and so he put on make-up, black, brown and blue, for two and a half hours), Edgar in Strindberg's *Dance of Death*, Shylock, James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and even a Lear

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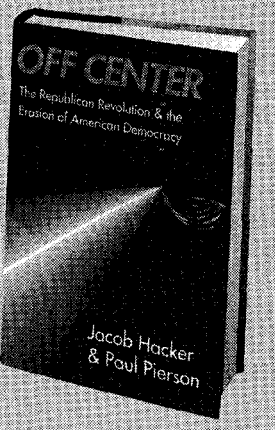

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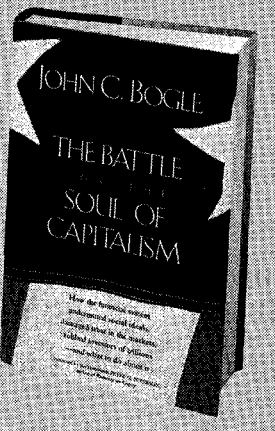

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on television still to come (with his ex-mistress Dorothy Tutin as Goneril). And as if requiring a fresh danger, Olivier—late in life—created a new threat: stage fright. There had to be dread for the exhilaration to thrive. He made awful movies, too, for big money, in order to pay for his brood. But he now regarded his stage self as the true gold that should not be sullied.

And he turned the idea of the National Theatre from a forlorn and forgettable foundation stone into something that may still inspire readers of these pages to visit England regularly. Coleman is at his best on the National Theatre years, and he may be happier dealing with practical business than with performance. But he reveals Olivier the manager as well as the inspiration. And despite the steady inroads of fatigue and illness, Olivier played that political game to the hilt. Most intriguing is his relationship with Kenneth Tynan, the bold critic who became the National's literary manager. Of course, that was hiring your most likely scourge—and Tynan had been especially rough on Vivien Leigh. But Coleman denies a gay bond between the two men. I share that feeling, which is not the same as saying that in all their years together at the National there was not a steady pressure of flirt, attraction and amatory maneuver.

Tynan was not gay. His diaries would hardly have omitted owning up to any item of gossip. But the discerning Gore Vidal once observed that Ken was a bit of a lesbian. In turn, Tynan's diaries contain this:

> Larry adopts a passive-feminine persona when in the presence of authority, i.e. he anticipates the castration by taking on the manner of a woman—mother.
>
> I recall what Gadge Kazan once said to me: "Above everything else, Larry is a coquette."

Tynan made trouble at the National yet seldom lost Olivier's loyalty. The dramaturge believed the theater should do Rolf Hochhuth's play *Soldiers*, which attacked Churchill and British bombing policy during the war. Tynan knew how that would enrage Lord Chandos, chairman of the board and a member of Churchill's war cabinet. And Olivier backed Tynan if only in opposing the government's power over play texts at that time. The Hochhuth play is not very good—but why should a national theater be free from such provocative mistakes? Why was Churchill above reproach? The debate was full of anguish and intrigue, and there's no need to credit Olivier's claims that he was not suited to such moods, or good at them. He was a matchless rival, a killer enemy, a winner at nearly anything he took on. And it is to his great credit that the National Theatre came into being. Yes, he loathed and saw the rat in his successor, Peter Hall—but it takes one to know one. There was a succession. There would be others. And the National Theatre still stands, not just a haven for classics and new plays but the arena where such actors as Judi Dench, Michael Gambon, Ian Holm and Anthony Hopkins have worked. That generation and others still to come should know that Olivier endured hells to make that place safe.

But "safe" is not the right word. Terry Coleman seems not to have fallen in love with his subject. That's fair enough: Olivier lovers often came away hurt, and in his two books—*Confessions of an Actor* and *On Acting*—there is enough self-love to cover the terrain. He could call chauffeurs and house maids "darling." I daresay that in the world of the theater, bisexual affection can pass without all the necessary touchings—in short, Olivier used his appeal to men and women alike all his years. It's clear that he could behave like a shit. Nor would he have disputed that charge. On the other hand, he had made a bargain with his world—that the one sin could be traded in if you acted like a prince. And more and more, we behold our world not as one subject to trust or confidence but as a seething playscape where placing your faith is like laying a bet. In that game, Olivier was the essential actor of the twentieth century, the one who proposed pretending as a basic form of existence. ■

All About My Mother

KATE LEVIN

CAPTAIN OF THE SLEEPERS.
By Mayra Montero. Translated by Edith Grossman. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 181 pp. $23.

Unless you have a taste for graphic depictions of necrophilia, you will never feel totally at ease reading *Captain of the Sleepers* in public. ("She was naked, perfumed and dry, totally dry, and I'd bet not as cold as and much less rigid than anyone would have suspected," begins the offender's tender recollection of the act.) Which will complicate things a bit, because the novel—the seventh by Cuban-born author Mayra Montero—is too engrossing to put down just to avoid inquisitive glances.

While this marks Montero's first foray into postmortem sex, both her fiction and nonfiction have always engaged deeply with life's darker passions. As a journalist in Puerto Rico (to which her family immigrated in the 1960s and where she has lived ever since), she covered the bloody coup d'états and revolutions in Central America and the Caribbean throughout the 1970s and '80s. Montero's first novel, *The Braid of the Lovely Moon*, published in 1987 and named a finalist for the prestigious Premio Herralde prize, delved into voodoo and the overthrow of Haitian dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier. And the work for which she is best known, her erotic fiction—notably the novels *The Last Night I Spent With You* and *Deep Purple*—typically uses lust to explore, in the author's words, "anguish about death." *Captain of the Sleepers* is no departure from that tradition.

The semi-naked stud soaking in the sun on the book's jacket is Andrés Yasín, the boy whose coming of age the novel chronicles and from whose perspective it is largely told. Andrés, however, is hardly in sunbathing shape when we first meet him. A 62-year-old "pale, flabby, totally bald old man," he opens the novel's prologue with a mutter: "I'm in the last place on earth I'd like to be." Andrés, agitated and anxious, is waiting in the bar of a St. Croix hotel for J.T. Bunker, a retired American pilot also known as the Captain of the Sleepers. The two haven't seen each other for fifty years, but this isn't a happy reunion: The Captain, 83 and dying of cancer, has summoned Andrés to St. Croix to explain, if not confess to, the offense he committed long ago against Andrés's late mother, for which the son swore he'd murder the Captain if he ever saw him again. Bunker arrives, and the two men—equally miserable, equally stirred to be in the other's presence again—begin a verbal dance around the crime, exquisitely choreographed by Montero with turns of rage, pity and sorrow. Andrés, whose glaring contempt for Bunker is punctured by curious pangs of admiration ("a fearless redhead...is what the Captain was"), just

Kate Levin, an assistant editor at Metropolitan Books, is a former Nation *intern.*

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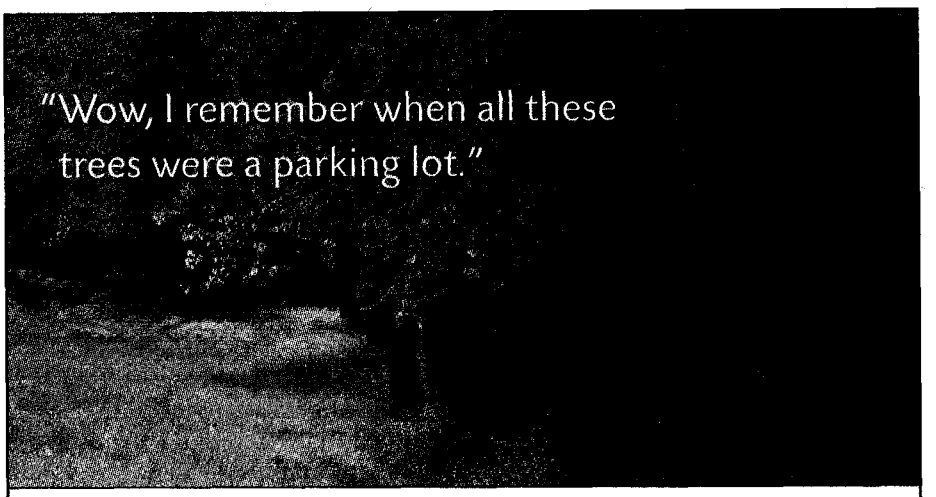
wants the "dying reprobate" to admit to his wrongdoing. Bunker won't oblige: "I can explain what you saw," he maintains, never denying the act but insisting that Andrés has misconstrued it. By cutting back and forth between Andrés's memories and italicized rejoinders in which the Captain offers his own recollection of the events, Montero homes in on the novel's central question: not whether a violation occurred but what stake each man has in clinging to his own interpretation of it.

To answer this question, Montero spirits us back to Andrés's childhood on Vieques, the Caribbean island just off the coast of mainland Puerto Rico. For a novel with violation at its core, it is hard to imagine a more appropriate setting. Until two years ago Vieques was occupied by the US Navy, which used the island and its surrounding waters as a bombing range—a testing ground for the weapons of war, including napalm and depleted uranium. Not long after the Navy took over three-quarters of Vieques in 1941, displacing half the population, the US government decided its security demanded that all of Vieques be made available for military use. The island's residents were to be "transported and resettled" on St. Croix, where the government, with a flourish of American ingenuity, decided they could work for a struggling US-owned rum company that Congress had long been burdened with subsidizing. Puerto Rico's American-appointed governor gave the plan his blessing.

The transfer (proposed in a 1947 US government memo that would become infamous among critics of the Navy's occupation) never took place, and most of Vieques's 15,000 residents stayed put. But the Navy and its activities penetrated nearly every aspect of life. This is the world—Vieques nearly one decade into the Navy's occupation—in which Montero sets the retrospective chapters of *Captain of the Sleepers*. In doing so, she achieves a rare thing: crystallizing the bitter history of the relations among the United States, mainland Puerto Rico and Vieques without resorting to polemics. She doesn't need to, as she nimbly reveals the indignity and injury embedded in that relationship—with the aid of Edith Grossman's characteristically fluid translation—through tone and characters that are symbolic but not simplistic. The Captain, a self-described "dissolute gringo," is linked with the Navy (and, more broadly, with US imperialism) from the beginning. Montero introduces him as the son of the man who recommended the acquisition



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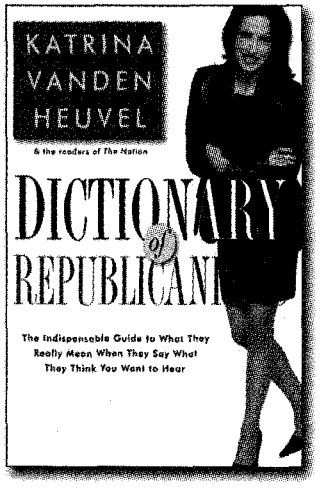
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of St. Croix to President Wilson, and she has him enter the Yasín family's life at the same time as the Navy does—in 1941, when Bunker transports to Vieques an American reporter covering the military's acquisition of the island and takes up residence at the hotel run by Andrés's parents, Frank and Estela. Bunker becomes something of a permanent guest on Vieques, befriending Frank, falling in love with Estela and developing a quasi-paternal relationship with little Andrés—becoming, not unlike the country he represents, at once a patron and a usurper, both welcomed and resented by his hosts.

In the first chapter of *Captain of the Sleepers*, it's Christmas Eve of 1949, and all is not well with the Yasín family: For starters, there's a corpse in the house. The Captain has shown up for dinner with one of his "sleepers"—the euphemism given, for Andrés's benefit, to the dead people Bunker transports for a living from St. Croix to Vieques, where they once lived (pre-Navy, by implication) and wished to be buried. The adults are tense, ostensibly because the dead man's family hasn't come to collect the body (later, one of Bunker's interpolations will add a new dimension to the scene). Andrés, however, is indifferent to the corpse, having only one person on his mind:

> My mouth was dry. Perhaps I turned a little pale. My mother must have thought I was shaken by the fact that a dead man would spend the night with us. But I hadn't even stopped to think about that. My dry mouth was due to her mouth—livid, as if it were bloodless—and my fearful eyes were due to her eyes.

Estela preoccupies Andrés most of the time, both in his childhood and during his present-day confrontation with the Captain. Montero's deft portrait of Andrés's Oedipal attachment is reminiscent of Henry Roth's depiction of David and Genya Schearl in the masterful *Call It Sleep*. Like Roth's David, Andrés is a mama's boy—an unusually sensitive kid who seeks refuge from his fears in his mother's arms. His fears are anything but irrational: Like David, Andrés inhabits a world of constant terror. By 1949 life in Vieques has assumed the shape of a nightmare: The ocean routinely spews forth dead fish and mangled turtles after the Navy's maneuvers, and the island is overrun with the walking corpses of the "dispossessed"—those the Navy kicked out of their homes and herded into camps, leaving them, in Montero's memorable phrase, to become "aware of their bones." And just as David undergoes a painful coming to consciousness about the primary source of terror in his life—his father—Andrés begins to see the Navy less as a purveyor of cool war play than as a toxic presence on the island. The bombardments Andrés once anticipated with excitement become instead a source of dread—a feeling that, inevitably, makes him long for his mother:

> Sometimes, for hours on end, a deathly silence fell, a viscous stillness that would stick to our souls and that we endured as we thought about the next explosion, which might not be heard right away. Hours or days could go by, and then, when we least expected it, the ground would shake; first it would shake and then we'd hear the blast.
>
> All morning at school I was thinking about Mamá without thinking anything concrete: I simply saw her and heard her voice saying unimportant words.

Like David in Henry Roth's Call It Sleep, *Andrés is an unusually sensitive kid who seeks refuge from his fears in his mother's arms.*

But even mama's boys have to leave the enchanted womb. In *Call It Sleep* Roth loosens Genya's grip on David by plunging him into the world of the Lower East Side, where New York–ese supplants Yiddish, his mother tongue. In *Captain of the Sleepers* it's not language that comes between Andrés and Estela but sex. It isn't, however, sex of the steamy, seductive, tumbling-in-the-sand variety. For such an erotically charged novel, *Captain of the Sleepers* has relatively little lovemaking—although there is plenty of getting fucked, literally and metaphorically.

Sex and violation are coupled from the novel's first erotic scene, in which Andrés accompanies his father to drop off the hotel's laundry at the home of the local washerwoman. Thinking he hears the moan of an animal, Andrés stumbles into a shed where the woman's daughter, Santa, is writhing beneath the body of a marine. The eagle tattoo on the marine's shoulder attracts Andrés's attention, as does the dollar bill he flings to the floor when he's finished with Santa. To keep Andrés quiet about the marine, Santa lets him touch her, but soon enough Andrés wants more, "wanted to do the same thing the Marine did, to get on top of her." And so goes Andrés's sexual initiation—the mimicking of a marine's manhandling of a local girl and the beginning of his mistrust of his mother, whom he seeks out after it's over only to discover that she has mysteriously disappeared. As the Captain reveals to Andrés fifty years later in St. Croix, it turns out that the young man wasn't the only one in the family with a secret sex life.

As Estela grows increasingly distant from Andrés, Santa becomes the woman in his world until she, too, is taken away—raped, tortured and murdered at the hands of American officers. Though the killing of Santa is predictable enough from the moment she appears in *Captain of the Sleepers*, the episode reveals one of the novel's great strengths: Montero's ability to convey how people viscerally experience the depredations of colonialism. Santa's death occurs just as Vieques begins to swell with soldiers training for the Korean War. As the Navy intensifies its maneuvers, a sense of claustrophobia pervades the novel, and the characters undergo a suffocation: "With the blanket of dead fish," Andrés recalls, "came the stink that saturated everything.... My mother fanned herself and complained that the foul smell took her breath away." On the night of Santa's funeral, Andrés's entire body is given over to suffering—which he begins to realize is not just a consequence of Santa's death but of the larger assault by the Navy on Vieques:

> I tossed and turned the whole night, and for the first time in many years, at dawn I wet the bed.... Planes flew over the hotel, and in a few minutes the bombardment began. That's how I knew the maneuvers were returning to dry land. Suddenly I thought of Santa, and my soul shriveled because I was never going to see her again. I squeezed my eyes shut, and when they were shut I had a premonition that the first dead fish were approaching the shore.

Others in the novel, of course, make that connection long before Andrés does. Frank, Andrés's father, is involved with a band of nationalists plotting an armed insurrection against Puerto Rico's governor, who is about to sign a Constitution that would cement Puerto Rico's subjugation to the United States and, by extension, prolong the Navy's occupation of Vieques. Estela is involved with one of her husband's comrades. The Captain is meddling in both affairs, aiding the former and, as Estela's jilted ex-lover, trying to thwart the latter. As the action of the book marches toward the uprising, we know that we are also approaching both Estela's death and Bunker's transgression. The novel's last sections alternate between Andrés's and the Captain's versions of these events, which include a

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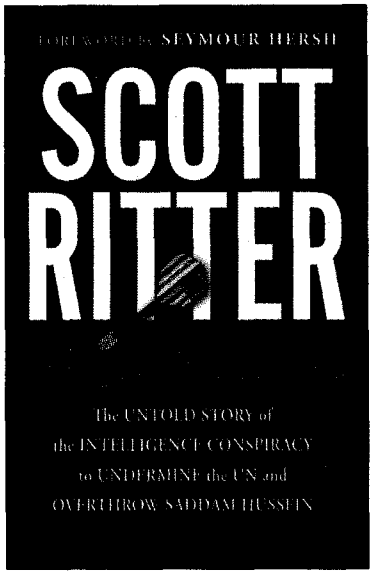
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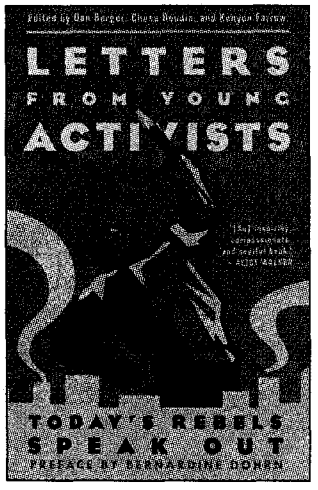

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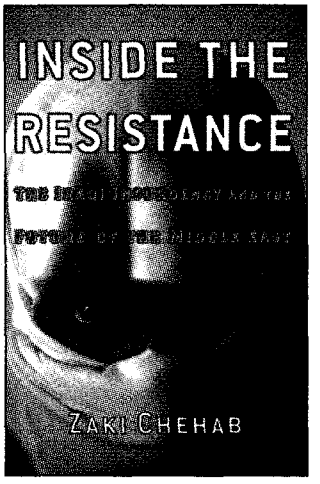

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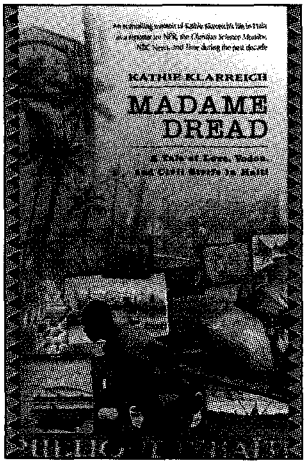

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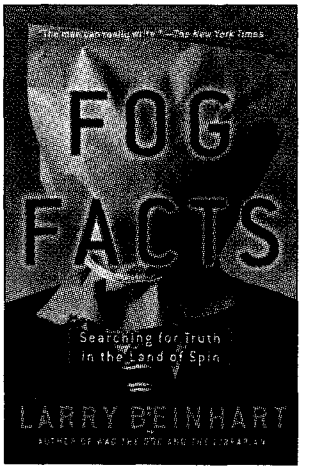

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sex scene so macabre and disturbing that readers are advised to save it for the privacy of their own homes. In their recounting of these incidents, the perspectives of Andrés and the Captain compete but don't necessarily contradict each other: Montero leaves it to us to decide who's right and who's wrong, who's misremembering the past and who's getting screwed. It is telling, however, that when the Captain and Andrés part ways in St. Croix at the novel's conclusion, only one of them leaves satisfied. The other, like the island of his birth, is left to reckon with the mess of the past. ■

Mystic River

TARIQ ALI

THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity.
By Amartya Sen. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 409 pp. $26.

The sage of Bengal has pronounced. Pluralism, we are informed, has an ancient pedigree in Indian history. It is embedded in the oldest known texts of Hinduism and, like a river, has flowed through Indian history (including the Mughal period, when the country was under Muslim rule) till the arrival of the British in the eighteenth century. It is this cultural heritage, ignored and misinterpreted by colonialists and religious fanatics alike, that shapes Indian culture and goes a long way toward explaining the attachment of all social classes to modern democracy. The argumentative tradition "has helped to make heterodoxy the natural state of affairs in India," exerting a profound influence on the country's politics, democracy and "the emergence of its secular priorities." This view informs most of the thought-provoking essays in Amartya Sen's new book, a set of reflections on India written in a very different register from his other books on moral philosophy and poverty. It is designed not so much for the academy but as a public intervention in the country of his birth, to which he remains firmly attached despite the Nobel Prize and his latest posting at Harvard as a Boston Brahman.

Although the essays in *The Argumentative Indian* were composed at different times, they have been successfully welded into a single volume. There is much to agree with here. Sen's lofty worldview remains staunchly secular and rationalist, as befits a scholar whose intellectual formation took place in Nehru's India, a historical time zone under constant attack today from Hindu nationalists on the one side and some of the more fashionable Indian luminaries of the US branch of the subaltern school of historians on the other. Unlike fellow Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul, Sen does not see the entry of Islam into India as a dagger thrust in the heart of Indian civilization. On the contrary, he argues that the effect of Mughal rule was beneficial. This was undoubtedly the case on the dietary front: The historian Irfan Habib has shown how the average Indian peasant ate better and more often in this period than under the British.

Given the title of Sen's book, it would be churlish to prove him wrong by simply nodding in approval, as is so often the case in our wonderful subcontinent. What follows, then, from this argumentative Pakistani is the expression of a few doubts concerning his central thesis and the odd complaint with regard to some omissions.

Can the lineages of modern Indian democracy be traced back to the holy texts, as Sen suggests? And does the affection of ordinary citizens for democracy have any material (as opposed to mystical) links to the arguments once heard by Buddha or King Ashoka (273–232 B.C.), let alone the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605)?

It's true that disputes abound in the ancient Sanskrit epics. Their multiple tales are, as Sen puts it, "engagingly full of dialogues, dilemmas and alternative perspectives," such as that of Javali, the notorious skeptic of the *Ramayana*, who explains in detail how "the injunctions about the worship of gods, sacrifice, gifts and penance have been laid down in the *sastras* [scriptures] by clever people, just to rule over [other] people." In codifying the rules for debate in the Buddhist councils, Ashoka demanded mutual respect among the various sects. While the Inquisition was sowing terror in Europe, Akbar, himself a Muslim, ruled that "anyone is to be al-

Tariq Ali, an editor of New Left Review, *is the author, most recently, of* Rough Music: Blair/Bombs/Baghdad/London/Terror *(Verso).*

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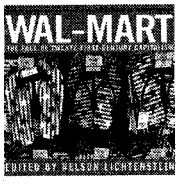

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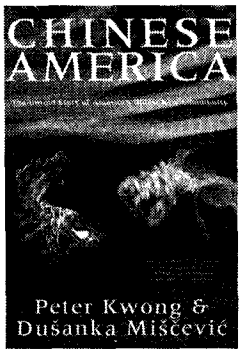

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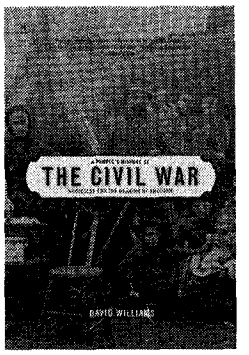

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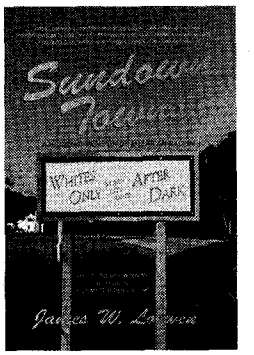

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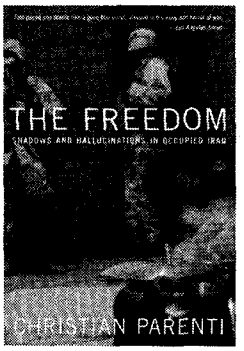

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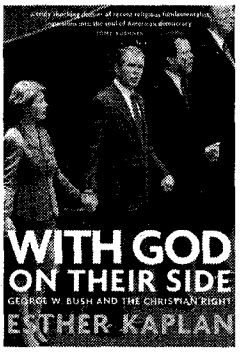

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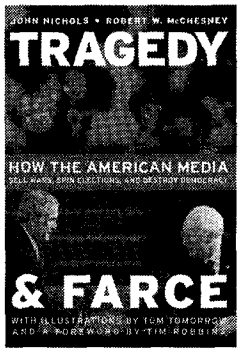

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lowed to go over to a religion that pleases him." The interreligious debates he organized in Agra included Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews and the atheists of the Carvaka school, who argued that Brahmans had established ceremonies for the dead only "as a means of livelihood" for themselves. Even the Vedic Song of Creation on the origins of the universe ends in radical doubt: "Who really knows? Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know."

Yet the skepticism voiced by some rulers and reflected in ancient texts was usually, if not always, confined to the priestly elites. The model for the debates among scholars from different religions and sects that were organized by Akbar's court was little different from similar discussions a few centuries earlier in the camp of Mongol leader Genghis Khan (1162–1227). With this exception: Mongol soldiers were permitted to both listen and participate in the arguments. The Mughal courts in India were sealed off from public view: The courtiers listened and, no doubt, nodded when the emperor smiled appreciatively as a point was scored, but they did not speak. Only the emperor and a few of his close advisers posed questions. The tyranny of the few over the many—exercised through a ritual combination of coercion and religion—was never seriously challenged in India until the advent of capitalist colonization. Nobody spoke for the subalterns.

Unlike ancient Greece, there were no city-based institutions where important issues could be debated, and the overglorified village *panchayats*, or councils, were the domain of the privileged where the poor could only appear as supplicants. Ancient India produced an ugly caste system that led to early divisions and splits, but neither Brahmanism proper nor its wilder offshoots—Buddhism and Jainism—came even close to producing a political philosophy that could lay the basis for a popular or semipopular assembly like those in ancient Greece, whose formal decrees always began with the invocation: "The *demos* has decided." The assemblies in Athens were barred to slaves, but they did include peasant proprietors and even some peasants who worked for others. Hence the debates between rich and poor; hence the fear of the multitude evinced by the wealthy; hence Solon's New Deal–ish boast: "I stood covering both [rich and poor] with a strong shield, permitting neither to triumph unjustly over the other." But even these traditions, while never forgotten, disappeared completely. The idea of democracy re-emerged in the debates that followed the English Revolution and found institutional form only after the American and French revolutions.

Ancient India produced great poets, philosophers and playwrights, along with art forms, gods and goddesses to match anything on offer in Athens, but it did not give birth to an Aristotle. And nothing remotely resembling the Assembly in Athens or the Senate in Rome arose on the subcontinent. Surely this must reflect some deficiency. Despite arguments within the elite and some wonderful expressions of skepticism cited by Sen, the *demos* was kept under strict control throughout Indian history. Uprisings threatening the status quo were brutally crushed by Hindu and Muslim ruler alike. Superstition and irrationality were institutionalized via a network of priestly domination.

The resilience of the Brahman traditions lay not in encouraging debate, as Amartya Sen suggests, but in the power of the caste system.

The resilience of Brahman traditions lay not in encouraging debate but in the power of the iniquitous caste system that survives to this day and pervades the spirit of Indian democracy. One wishes that Sen, a long-standing critic of economic inequality, had given us his views on whether globalization tends to weaken or strengthen caste chauvinism in India. When in the third decade of the past century, the "untouchable" leader Dr. Ambedkar insisted that his caste not be considered Hindu so that they, like the Muslims, could demand separate electorates from the British rulers, he was sweetly rebuffed by Mahatma Gandhi, no doubt for the noblest of reasons. Hard-core confessional elements in the leadership of the ruling Congress Party were only too aware that without the "low castes" being counted as Hindus their overall weight in the population would be drastically reduced.

What of India's Muslims? The Mughal conquest of India created a strong centralized state, but there was not even an embryonic consciousness of democracy, even in its most primitive, patrician form. The emperor was supreme. His subjects could plead for justice in his presence once a week, and if they were lucky they could be rewarded with a few coins and kind words. Interestingly enough, while all the existing texts of classical Greece and Rome were translated into Arabic during the eighth and ninth centuries, and while Islamic schools of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and medicine flourished in Córdoba, Palermo and Baghdad, the one genuine innovation of the Greeks—the idea of democracy—did not travel. The caliph was both the spiritual and the temporal ruler, and any notion of an assembly of equals would have been seen as a godless challenge to Allah's vice regent. The Mughal order in India was based on an alliance of the wealthy and the creation of a strong central bureaucracy with rights over large tracts of land.

Sen is correct to stress the tolerance of the Mughals, particularly Akbar, toward the non-Muslim majority. The reasons for this policy, however, were not simply altruistic. The Muslim conquerors, like the British after them, knew that stable rule was dependent on securing the consent of crucial layers of the indigenous elites. This they did successfully, and even the last of the great Mughal emperors, the devout and narrow-minded Aurangzeb, presided over an imperial army led by an equal mix of Hindu and Muslim generals. When the British East India Company's army secured Bengal as a bridgehead in 1757 and made Calcutta the first capital of British India, it did so with a very small number of British officers, European weaponry and local recruits on a monthly wage. Like its Mughal predecessor, the company was desperate for allies and often bought them in the marketplace. The Bengali Renaissance that produced Nobel Prize–winning writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore, filmmaker Satyajit Ray, the Sens and numerous others was the result of a unique synthesis between local tradition and imperial modernity, based on a capitalist economy. Without capitalism there was no Indian modernity. Democracy in British India (as in Britain itself) came a century and a half later as a result of pressure from below on the part of a growing middle-class intelligentsia in Calcutta. "What Bengal thinks today," declared the reformer Ram Mohun Roy, "India thinks tomorrow."

That is why imperial ideologues as well as colonial apologists like Rudyard Kipling came to despise Bengal. The Bengalis, in their estimation, were effete intellectuals ill equipped to fight, unlike the "martial races" of the Punjab and North-West Frontier. Kipling's fiction is filled with crude stereotypes of the dark-skinned Bengali *babu* (clerk) as contrasted with the noble and fair-skinned Pathan or the Rajput war-

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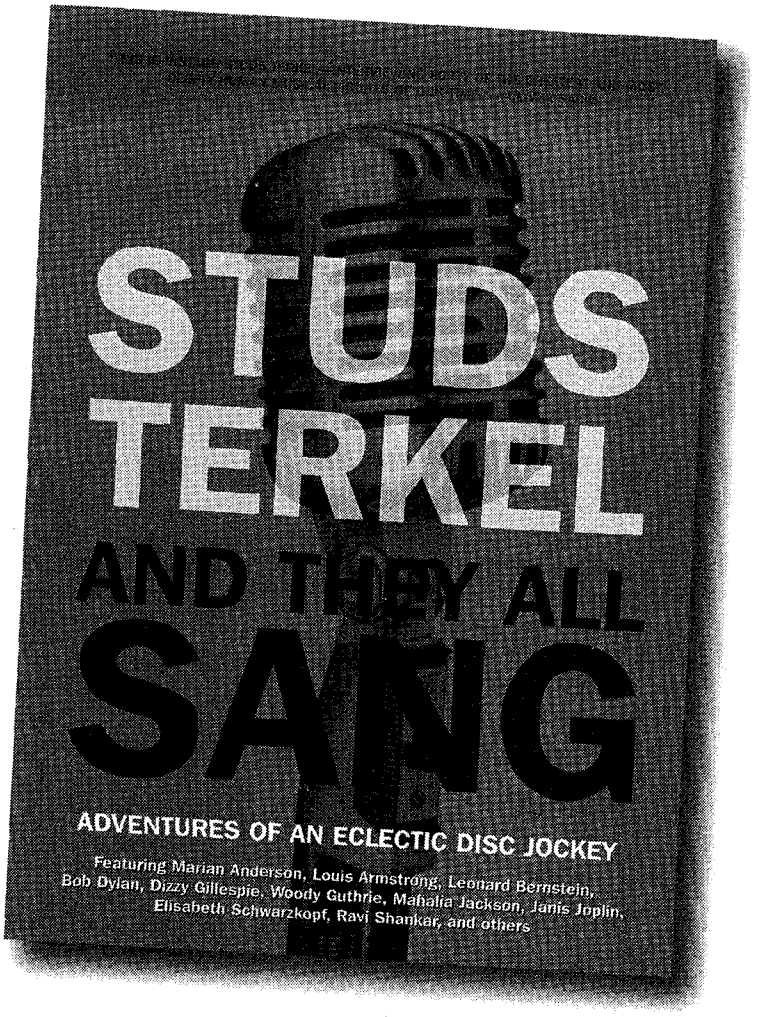
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rior. Better they were kept illiterate lest they become uppity like the Bengalis.

Even supposing there was a strong "argumentative" tradition in India 3,000 years ago, was this the frail aqueduct through which the democratic stream finally moved? Such is the argument of Sen and (in a more fashionable formulation) of postcolonial scholars who scornfully dismiss the suggestion that the British presence had anything to do with the spread of democratic ideas and the rise of Indian democracy. This is, in my view, a form of mysticism. We may not like it, but there is no denying the impact of 150 years of British rule in India, which brought capitalism to the country and overwhelmingly determined the nature and character of Indian institutions.

Sen accepts uncritically the historian Partha Chatterjee's argument that, in Chatterjee's words, the emergence of nationalism created

> its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside," of the economy...of science and technology...where the West has proved its superiority.... The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain...the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one's spiritual culture.

Here one discerns a retreat from the secular definition of nationhood espoused by Nehru and a slide into the murky domain of Hindu nationalism, albeit in an ultra-civilized fashion. In rejecting the heritage of Nehruvian socialism for its statism and affiliation with the urban middle class, "left-wing" postcolonial historians like Chatterjee have eerily converged in their arguments with right-wing Hindu politicians, who insist that the content of Indian nationalism has always been spiritual, i.e., religious, thus excluding India's large Muslim minority from the national community. (When the Hindu nationalist brigade in the United States mounted a disgraceful campaign two years ago against the Library of Congress decision to award a research fellowship to Romila Thapar, one of the most distinguished secular historians of ancient India, a majority of Indian historians on American campuses remained silent.) What is "one's spiritual culture" and "cultural identity" if not religion, even if lightly disguised as the Cow Protection League or the National Fund to Rebuild Mosques? Was it possible for nationalism to move in a more cosmopolitan than spiritual direction?

This raises the Gandhi question. Was it necessary for the Mahatma to use spiritual (Hindu) imagery and language to rouse the majority of the countryside from their torpor? Nehru and Tagore did not think so and argued heatedly with the old fox, but on this Gandhi would not budge. It was they who gave up, Tagore in despair and Nehru in the half-hope that the damage was reparable. But it wasn't, and it led ultimately to the fatal breach with secular Muslims, including Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. That there were other straws in the nationalist breeze was revealed time and time again in the wave of strikes that paralyzed the country in late 1945 and then again in 1946, when Muslim, Hindu and Sikh naval ratings united against the British and seized the ships, raising the banner of revolution. This was the most significant mutiny in the history of the British Empire. On the advice of Jinnah and Gandhi, the sailors surrendered "to India not the British."

Was it necessary for Gandhi to use spiritual—i.e., Hindu—imagery and language to rouse the Indian peasantry from its torpor?

The attachment to the "distinctiveness of one's spiritual culture" undoubtedly helped provoke the bloody partition of the subcontinent, but the institutions that provided the spinal cord of the new states owed little to spiritual traditions. They were British creations, and Parliament was not the only one. It certainly helped to unite India, but in neighboring Pakistan it is the army and, to a lesser extent, the civil service, both creations of the Raj, that have ruled the country. What happened to the "argumentative" tradition here? Taxila (near Islamabad) was, after all, the site of one of the world's first large (Buddhist) universities centuries before the Christian Era. It is not that most Pakistanis did or do not like democracy. A new imperial power decreed that the army was the most reliable guarantor of stability and order in the new country. Here Washington has been consistent. Only this year Condoleezza Rice, on a visit to Islamabad, praised Gen. Pervez Musharraf and his regime—apparently secular and autocratic—as the model for the Muslim world. (Including Iraq?)

In India democracy has become embedded as the only acceptable form of rule largely because of geography. If Pakistan split into two after an eleven-year military dictatorship from 1958 to '69, what would an attempt to impose a military regime in India have done to that country? Created a three-way split? Or even more fragments? The regional elites realized that this would be an economic disaster, and the unity of India under a democratic umbrella became the common sense of the country. It is this and mass hostility to autocracy that explains the longevity of the democratic system, but one should not underestimate the power of turbo-propelled capitalism to weaken democracy in India just as it is doing in its heartlands. Indians may want democracy, but it is hardly a prerequisite for a dynamic capitalism. Europe demonstrated this during the first 300 years of capitalism; China does so today.

The essay on the giant of Bengali letters, Tagore (1861–1941), who died six years before India and his beloved Bengal was partitioned, is studded with gems. Sen knows Tagore's work well, and his grandfather, a distinguished historian of Hinduism, worked with the great poet in Santiniketan, a progressive educational academy that provided the inspiration for Dartington Hall in England. Tagore's standing in the West has been subject to many fluctuations. His mystic-spiritual side appealed to many Westerners, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, but as Sen explains, this was only one side of the man. In Bengal and India he was the voice of reason, a cosmopolitan who encouraged the self-emancipation of the people and urged them to free themselves from the Brahman and the British and break the chains of caste and poverty. The dangers he saw for India were structural, not spiritual. As he wrote in 1939: "It does not need a defeatist to feel deeply anxious about the future of millions who, with all their innate culture and their peaceful traditions, are being simultaneously subjected to hunger, disease, exploitations foreign and indigenous, and the seething discontents of communalism."

Sen's reflections on Tagore, however, would have benefited from comparison with another great Indian poet: Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), who wrote in Urdu and Persian. Iqbal, too, was given to mysticism, but of the Sufi variety. Younger than Tagore, he was greatly influenced by Hegel and the German philosophical tradition and was a great favorite of both Nehru and Jinnah. Iqbal, too, died before partition.

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Tragically, he was immediately mummified by the new state of Pakistan, his message so distorted that he is seen by many in that country as a revivalist, which is far from the truth. Like Tagore, he loathed priest and mullah alike and celebrated reason and knowledge, as in this verse dividing God from Man:

> You created Night, I the Lamp
> You the earth, I the bowls
> You created wilderness, mountains
> and ravines
> I the flower beds, gardens and groves
> I make mirrors from stone
> I find antidotes in poison.

Both Tagore and Iqbal would have been mortified at the direction taken by the modern leaders of the old subcontinent. Like Sen, both would have been alarmed by the nuclear turn and missiles with confessional names targeted by each side against the other. Even those who disagree with Sen or see him as a tame and toothless Bengal tiger will be compelled to engage with his arguments. That alone is sufficient reason to welcome the publication of this book. ■

The Scrivener and the Whale

VIVIAN GORNICK

MELVILLE: His World and Work.
By Andrew Delbanco. Knopf. 415 pp. $30.

A recent review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of a new edition of Grimm's Fairy Tales predicted that the book under discussion would fill "a yawning gap" as it rescued the fairy tales from children and folklorists so that we might see the collection as a major literary work. I read this interesting, pertinent sentence over someone's shoulder, while sitting on a plane, just as I was about to open Andrew Delbanco's new biography of Herman Melville. Surely, the book in my lap would be setting out to do the same: rescue the author of *Moby-Dick* from the miles of scholarship informed by received wisdom that already surround Melville's life and work, thereby making the great nineteenth-century writer live anew for the current generation of readers.

Herman Melville was born in 1819 in New York City into a family of social connection and financial failure: The mother was a Gansevoort, both grandfathers were Revolutionary War heroes and the father died a bankrupt when Herman was 12 years old, leaving a wife and eight children to struggle on as best they could. None of the children grew up to be what is commonly called successful. Herman went to school now and then; clerked now and then; considered surveying now and then. In the same aimless way, at the age of 21 he signed on as a common seaman on a whaling ship from which, after six months at sea, he deserted in the Marquesan Islands, where he was held for some weeks by a native tribe in what he later called "indulgent captivity." Upon his escape he slowly made his way back to America, now in possession of the experience on which his deepest self would draw for the next fifty years. He'd been gone nearly four years.

He decided to write a book about life among the Polynesian islanders. The book was called *Typee*, and it achieved a commercial success that, for a minute, made Melville a minor celebrity; more important, it made him realize that he was a writer. Within the next five years, he published four books—*Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*—each less well received than the one before. One by one, the books moved further away from the simple adventure tale with which he had begun, but the readers of *Typee* did not follow.

Writing had released in Melville a passionate, brooding nature that turned ever more inward, puzzling openly over the concern that had been pressing on him since he'd gone to sea, namely, the metaphysical truth of human existence. As Babbalanja says in *Mardi*, "I am intent upon the essence of things, the mystery that lieth beyond...that which is beneath the seeming." What tormented men, Melville had come to realize, was not so much the longing to believe that there is meaning in the universe, as the suspicion that behind the longing lies the fear of nothingness. At sea he had watched both the longing and

Vivian Gornick's most recent book is The Solitude of Self: Thinking About Elizabeth Cady Stanton *(Farrar, Straus & Giroux).*

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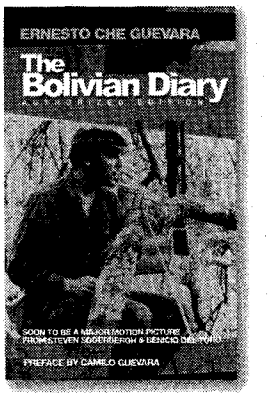

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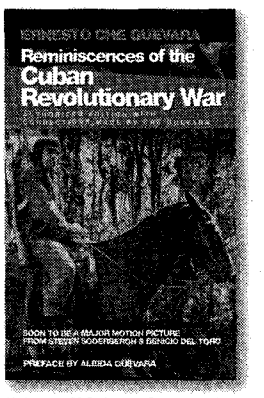

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the fear play themselves out fully—seen the ongoing struggle in those around him between the potential for savagery and the desire for transcendence—and he'd come to understand that the behavior Christians call civilized does not reach down to the center. Given the right circumstances, most men can demonstrate that both Good and Evil are conditional, and that the elemental forces of life are overwhelming. Wherefore, then, God and Satan?

The question obsessed him. There developed within him a moodiness that William James would trace to "the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is." As this craving could not be satisfied, it haunted him. Years after they'd met, Nathaniel Hawthorne, during a visit with Melville in Liverpool, wrote in his journal: "It is strange how he persists...in wandering to-and-fro over these [theological] deserts.... He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.... He has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than the rest of us."

For the readers of *Typee*, each new literary offering of Melville's seemed a cheat. These morbid, confused abstractions were not what they had signed on for—and, indeed, the narrative line in these books is often bogged down as Melville struggles to clarify what compels him yet resists his control. He knew he was alienating his readership—"If doubts distract you," says a character in *Mardi*, "in vain will you seek sympathy from your fellow men"—but what could he do other than become his own searching self?

In the spring of 1850 Melville sat down to write another tale of whaling ships and the men who work on them, but this one overtook him as none before it had. Suddenly everything came together—language, structure, metaphor—with extraordinary multiplicity; one story, as he said later, turned out to be two, the larger of which drank his blood, while the other demanded only his ink. Here, at last, he knew what he was doing—and what he was doing was making a major contribution to American literature in a Modernist style that would not come into its own for another century. The book, of course, was *Moby-Dick*; and it was (famously) as great a critical and commercial failure as his other books had been. Only a handful of people—among them Hawthorne—saw *Moby-Dick* for the masterwork that it was.

Melville kept writing—poems, stories, novels, among them *Pierre*, *Bartleby the Scrivener* and, at the last, *Billy Budd*—but the forty years after *Moby-Dick* (he died in 1891) constituted something of a life sentence: the long, painful years of a failed writer living in depressed and reclusive obscurity, working in the New York Customs House, seeing almost no one, entirely forgotten by whatever public he had once had. Upon his death many were surprised to learn that Melville had still been alive.

In 1850 Melville sat down to write another tale of whaling ships and the men who work on them. The result was Moby-Dick.

Oh, yes, one other thing: He was married for more than forty years to a woman of his own class with whom he had two sons and two daughters, but neither in his wife nor in any of his children did Melville find a soul mate. Nowhere at home did he receive solace of the spirit, find relief from or exaltation in that which pressed so sorely on him. Perhaps it was this unhappy circumstance that turned the impassioned and volatile writer into a stricken domestic tyrant who stormed about the house, frightening all who came his way, then dissolving in bitter regret. For years on end the family, according to Melville's granddaughter, suffered "not only from insufficient funds for daily needs but far more from his bursts of nervous anger and attacks of morose conscience." One son committed suicide at 18, the other died at 35 far from home.

For some contemporary readers, this dramatic failure of domesticity is added proof of Melville's homoerotic leanings. I say "added" because much has also been made of his extravagant unhappiness over Hawthorne's willingness to let their friendship drift (in a letter Melville writes bitterly that Hawthorne "withholds" himself, and in a poem he seems to beg the older writer, "Give me thyself!"). But above all, it has been argued, it is in the writing itself that the homoerotic Melville is inescapably to be found: in the extraordinary portraits of male companionship (Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*), the clear adoration of male beauty (*Billy Budd*), the erotic cast of men in bondage to one another (*Benito Cereno*). One could easily go on and on. But what, exactly, are we to make of that which is clearly there for all to read?

For me, Melville's homoeroticism is akin to that of D.H. Lawrence. They were two men who hungered to reach down to the very center of human existence, where the self that was dark, free, wild, even mystic—have I left out any piece of the rhetoric?—was waiting to be discovered. Both wanted to know, with an almost religious hysteria, the primitive "truth" of things more deeply than either wanted anything else. Each writer associated such knowingness entirely with the world of men; the world of strong and vivid action; the one in which one came dangerously up against one's own fears and desires. It was only with men that one could get naked, so to speak. With women one was always somehow clothed. In their world there was the relief of order, sentiment, convention; but here one struggled incessantly against the constraint that domesticity placed on inner exploration.

Yet each man was ineluctably attached to women—clung to them, wouldn't have known how to put it together without them—at the same time that he eroticized in imagination if not in actuality (the truth we'll never know) what passed between men. In short, whether he understood it or not, each felt the amazing complexity of sexual force—and it was out of what he felt that he wrote. The genius lay in the strength of sensibility.

It seems to me that these are the complications we are calling homoerotic, and they are interesting when seen in the light of a psyche divided in anguish and excitement against itself, rather than that of straightforward sexual attraction to the members of one's own sex. This self-division is, in fact, the key that, when turned, unlocks the door—in Melville as well as in Lawrence—to the inner drama out of which both made great fiction.

During most of the century and more since Melville's death, a mountain of American scholarship—some glorious, most mundane—has gathered around his work and his person. Among the more luminous of the critical works is F.O. Matthiessen's 1941 classic, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, a book that many consider the seminal text in American literary studies. The book is inspiring not only for the freshness of Matthiessen's insights into nineteenth-century American writing but for the remarkable sensitivity with which he writes. In a discussion of *Moby-Dick* Matthiessen tells us, "The instinctive rightness with which [Melville] interrelated the levels in his structure can be seen only by a kind of slow moving-picture of the whole"—and then proceeds to give us this "slow moving-picture" so beautifully the

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reader could weep. Here we have the kind of absorptive, hovering prose that makes literature out of criticism.

The work done on Melville the man is, I think, often more problematic. Every biographer begins by complaining that the subject is "unknowable," as a vital absence of documentation surrounds the life, and then proceeds to churn out hundreds and hundreds of pages that, in the end, seem to confirm the original misgiving. Within the past ten years alone we have had Hershel Parker's two-volume biography—nearly 2,000 pages long!—at the end of which many readers have felt that they do not know Melville any better than they did before they read the biography; while everything about him is on the page, the man himself remains elusive.

Oddly enough, upon the appearance of the first volume of the Parker biography in 1997, it was Andrew Delbanco, professor of American studies at Columbia, who wrote in an unusually lengthy essay in *The New York Review of Books*, "Herman Melville is a singularly unyielding subject for literary biography," as "the dim record of Melville's life simply disappears into the glare of his work, and the best one can hope for is to glimpse a few moments of convergence between them." Essentially, the review accused Parker of having turned a "digitized Log into a biography" marked by the kind of "promiscuous detail" that spoke to an academic thesis both reductive and overdetermined. Curiously enough, the overdetermined thesis was that of sexual longing—"at the root of every mood and motivation Parker finds sexual craving"—and it wasn't that Delbanco thought there was no truth in this observation but that in Parker's hands it became an ax that the hapless biographer ground relentlessly because he had no real ideas. There was, in Delbanco's view, "no grand theme" emerging from Parker's lifelong literary devotion.

Now here we are, eight years later, with Delbanco himself weighing in with 400-odd pages on the man he long ago told us was a bad bet for literary biography. The reader cannot help wondering, *So why write another one?* And, as though hearing the silent question, Delbanco replies, but in terms that seem to this reviewer somewhat less than reassuring. "The reason," he confides in his preface, "has to do with a feeling that we all live by some unknowable combination of free will and fate. This feeling tends to grow as one gets older, and so there is a certain comfort in watching someone make something beautiful and enduring out of the recalcitrance and fleetingness of life." There is a sense of the reverential in this abstraction that grows even stronger when Delbanco shares with us the memory of a time when he held an old letter of Melville's in his hands and felt that he was "eavesdropping, like a tourist in a church who comes upon a worshipper kneeling in prayer." Now we know we are in the presence of adoration; and sure enough, the preface ends: "Anyone who reads Melville's words will know what Emerson meant when he wrote in his journal that, while reading Shakespeare, 'I actually shade my eyes.'"

These sentences, I must admit, made me desperately uncomfortable. What, I wondered, can follow from such a beginning except hagiography, pure and simple? The thought proved both warranted and unwarranted: Delbanco's book is hagiography, though not pure and simple.

Melville: His World and Work is a full and faithful account of all that is already known and recorded of the writer's personal life, and it places that life richly (and again, fully) in the politics and culture of the writer's time. Delbanco has, of course, read everything by and about his subject and can—and does—rehearse a wealth of responses to Melville's work. On the one hand, this rehearsal demonstrates the authority of research; on the other, it gives us a book saturated in quotations from other readers. On

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every other page—or so it seems—Lewis Mumford notes, Elizabeth Hardwick observes, Harold Bloom remarks. A rudimentary list of those quoted includes Edward Said, Walker Percy, E.M. Forster, Newton Arvin, Edmund Wilson, W.H. Auden, John Updike, along with the lesser known but influential academics Frank Lentricchia, Richard Slotkin and Dominick LaCapra. The odd thing here is that much of what these scholars and writers say can be said without the invocation of their illustrious names. For example, as Hardwick remarked, the man who wrote *Typee* was not "a painter of his own face in the mirror"; as Mumford observed, in New York Melville "simply could not forget the wideness of the world"; as Slotkin has said, Moby Dick is "at once masculine and feminine, a phallus and an odalisque."

Now, Delbanco is a sophisticated writer who could easily have put these sentiments into words of his own. Yet he chose not to. Not, I think, out of the ordinary academic habit of piling up superficial appeals to authority but rather because he is intent on creating a brilliant surround for the work of a writer he does, in fact, love indiscriminately; one that is meant to draw us irresistibly inside the persuasion that Melville's work is not only majestic but inordinately protean: It can and does mean all things to all people in all times, accommodating itself easily to whatever system of interpretation the cultural moment brings into focus. That, I think, is the thesis to which this biography is dedicated.

Thus, we have quotes to support the suggestion of a transcendental Melville, a Modernist Melville, a cold war Melville, a gay Melville, an ecological Melville, a Melville of American imperialism and of anti-imperialist blowback. This last, in particular, gets a great deal of play. Edward Said is quoted as having said, on the eve of the Afghanistan invasion, "Collective passions are being funnelled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick," and Delbanco helps him out by observing that, later, many others "likened President George W. Bush to Ahab in his determination to attack Iraq." This book was published before Denis Donoghue ventured that *Moby-Dick* foretold America's bid for global domination but not before Delbanco could tell us that the Pequod is really the Democratic Party of 1850 falling to pieces.

But it is when we read, "The binary balance of [Melville's] sentences creates a seesaw feeling not very different from what one feels when reading a late twentieth-century postmodern writer like Jacques Derrida or Paul de Man" that we know we are in the presence of a writer whose claims for his subject are so far-reaching as to lose their interpretive value, and we cannot help wondering, *What is going on here?* Where is the "grand theme" that holds all this indiscriminate theorizing together? Merely to ask the question is to answer it.

The problem is one of imagination. When F.O. Matthiessen presented Melville in the truly grand terms by which we have considered him for fifty years—the tragic vision of Man Against Nature, our own Innate Depravity, the guilty need for Crucified Innocence, the Malign Intelligence of existence itself—those terms were fresh, original, exhilarating. Today they are worn thin, in criticism and biography alike. On the other hand, the simple substitution of newer terms derived from Freud, politics and literary theory are equally unsatisfying—reductive and schematic—when applied by scholars working within a mental framework derived from academic conventions that do not allow the subject to fly free. Delbanco's book is neither reductive nor schematic—it is well written and, more important, strongly engaged—yet it does not, cannot, bring us Melville anew because in the deepest sense it is hemmed in by these very conventions.

What is needed for a figure as iconized as Melville is a biographer possessed by a flash of original insight around which the "life" can be organized, the kind that is very little dependent on documentation. The only obligation of such insight is that it prove genuine, not fabricated, and that it deepen the writing until something true about the man who wrote *Moby-Dick* is acutely felt by responsive readers who are sure to recognize the close of a yawning gap when they see one. ■

Soul on Ice

DAVID YAFFE

"Is Jazz Dead?" asks Stuart Nicholson in a provocative book title. Anyone following jazz journalism for the past decade would be familiar with its alleged assassins. The remaining four major American labels have eviscerated their jazz rosters. Norah Jones—with her mix of country mannerisms and pop accessibility—keeps Blue Note afloat while lauded musicians cling to their contracts for dear life. "Neoconservatives" run Jazz at Lincoln Center while the avant-garde languishes. Legends are dying while young lions fail to live up to early promise. Conservatories—a booming, multimillion-dollar educational industry, Nicholson laments—are stultifying the young and suppressing innovation. And even though that Ken Burns PBS documentary aired nearly five years ago and tried to spread the word, it too is somehow to blame for jazz's misfortunes. Armstrong, Ellington and Basie managed to thrive during the Depression and segregation, but label conglomerates, MTV, file-sharing and institutional repertory have been hazardous to the music's health on its native grounds. Nicholson, an English jazz critic for the UK magazine *Jazzwise*, paints a grim picture indeed, but he has a solution: relocate to Europe. The Europeans support the arts, he tells us, are hip to the latest experimental styles and even have Norwegians who play better Ellington revivals than anyone in the dreary United States.

For the jazz musicians and jazz journalists struggling for mainstream attention,

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

IS JAZZ DEAD? (OR HAS IT MOVED TO A NEW ADDRESS).
By Stuart Nicholson.
Routledge. 270 pp. $19.95.

CROSSOVERS: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture.
By John Szwed.
University of Pennsylania. 283 pp. $47.50.

DJANGO: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend.
By Michael Dregni. Oxford. 326 pp. $35.

NORTHERN SUN, SOUTHERN MOON: Europe's Reinvention of Jazz.
By Mike Heffley. Yale. 392 pp. $45.

JAZZ ON THE RIVER.
By William Howland Kenney.
University of Chicago. 229 pp. $27.50.

David Yaffe is assistant professor of English at Syracuse University, and the author of Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing, *which will be published by Princeton University Press in January.*

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the sky could appear to be falling, but judging from the deluge of recent books, the music's shelf life is just beginning. Jazz, more than any other musical genre, currently dominates academic presses; compared with pondering the use of the grace note in Haydn, chasing the path of Django Reinhardt or a riverboat band might even seem sexy. Hip-hop is so recent, rock and roll so flaky and ubiquitous. Scholarly presses are more willing to admit jazz's importance today than they were when the music was at its most vital stages of development. For years Oxford's Sheldon Meyer was the only university press editor willing to risk a jazz book, and even then most of the ones he edited were collections of newspaper and magazine columns by journalists with no academic credentials; now, even as these presses are tightening their belts and streamlining their lists, they are devoting more pages to the music than ever. "There are days when I think we are in the Golden Age of my obsessions," wrote John Szwed in *Crossovers*, one of the many recent university press books on jazz. "The scholarship and popular writing on the contribution of African Americans is now so extensive that you could spend a lifetime reading, looking, and listening, and still never catch up." It would take a while to catch up on jazz books published in the past year alone. In addition to collections of previously published writings by Szwed, Gary Giddins and Dan Morgenstern, more specialized studies abound: biographies and cultural histories, investigations global and local, musicological and historical, journalistic and scholarly. Is jazz dead? As Louis Armstrong is said to have replied when asked to define jazz, "If you have to ask, you'll never know."

Ripeness is all, in Nicholson's book. For his research, he leans heavily on jazz criticism from the past decade and interviews with the musicians he deems to be sufficiently forward-looking, while the villains of the book get only glib dismissals without a chance for retort. Nicholson does not detect jazz's pulse through virtuosity but instead listens for obvious journalistic hooks. The Bad Plus's intricate jazz trio covers of Black Sabbath and Gloria Gaynor make easy copy for reviewers, but are they making music of value or merely technically adept kitsch? It doesn't matter to Nicholson: They're making it new. According to this line of reasoning, only musicians who are utilizing the latest technology or counter-intuitive pop songs, or who are otherwise attracting the attention of English newspaper editors, are keeping the music alive. Nicholson laments the crossover vocalists, jazz educators and repertory revivalists before deciding that Europe is the environment most congenial to the jazz beat he covers. He has a nose for news, but where is that device Hemingway recommended to younger writers: the bullshit detector? Nicholson swoons over Norwegian pianist Tord Gustavsen, describing him as "an exceptionally lucid soloist" with "a sure sense of melodic structure and lyrical imagination." That may be, but Gustavsen's performance at New York's Merkin Concert Hall last spring was an exceptional snooze, an elegant but desiccated retread of territory covered better by Bill Evans and Keith Jarrett. Nicholson has nevertheless found his Great Nordic Hope.

There's also a colonialism lurking beneath this progressive veneer. Nicholson's favorite younger musicians—with the exceptions of avant-garde pianist Matthew Shipp and eclectic clarinetist Don Byron—tend to be white and European, while his neocon enemies, notably Wynton Marsalis, are black men in impeccably tailored suits. Nicholson quotes a range

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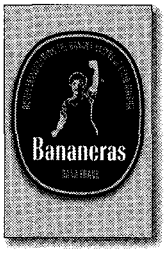
Dana Frank



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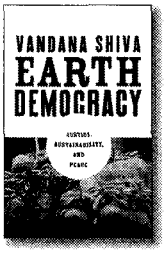

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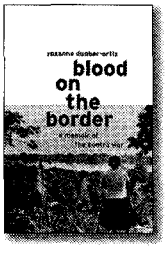

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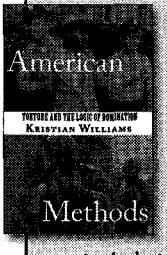

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of jazz critics and his appointed European jazz saviors—he places a particular premium on Jan Garbarek's "Nordic tone," a revolution he likens to the films of Ingmar Bergman—but neither Marsalis nor any of his musical and critical partisans are given a fair chance to respond to the charges made against him, despite the book's two chapters about him. The book has a couple of quotations from Marsalis about his playing and his nonlinear sense of jazz history, but these statements are batted away like so many straw men. It is unclear whether these conversations with Marsalis took place before, during or after Nicholson had developed his rhetorical strategy, but a more substantial response from Marsalis would have only strengthened Nicholson's argument.

"Wynton Marsalis's legacy for an idealized representation of jazz from its golden years is simply a means of asserting black cultural identity within the predominantly white cultural mainstream of the United States," Nicholson claims. Has there ever been anything "simple" about asserting black cultural identity against a white mainstream? And is Nicholson himself contributing to a version of that white cultural mainstream, even if it is that rather marginalized mainstream of jazz critics? Marsalis's merits as a composer—Pulitzer Prize and all—can be debated, but Nicholson's one-sided screed hardly provides a forum in which such a debate can take place. Besides, anyone attending recent Jazz at Lincoln Center fundraisers would be puzzled by Nicholson's portrait of Marsalis as a hidebound ideologue who rejects all forms of postwar popular culture. While raising money for his orchestra's lavish new Columbus Circle quarters over the past few years, Marsalis and members of his orchestra performed with Stevie Wonder, Paul Simon and Bob Dylan, producing collaborations without compromise or condescension. It was a long way from the Bad Plus's gimmickry. In fact, Marsalis's insistence on laying down the iron law of swing with rock and r&b icons added a rich tension to their performances. This more eclectic side of Marsalis—even if it emerged merely in the service of getting his concert hall built—would also provide a nuance to Nicholson's invective, and nuance is one thing this book is conspicuously lacking. Is jazz as we know it dead? The reply growled by trumpeter Lester Bowie in his 1968 composition "Jazz Death" still resounds today: "Well, that all depends on what you know."

Nicholson may believe that the future of jazz lies in Europe, but Michael Dregni's *Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend* reminds us that a vital part of its past flourished there, too. The story of the Gypsy is one that includes survival from a near-fatal fire, the development of a ferocious, percussive and widely imitated guitar style with the use of only three working fingers, stardom in Vichy France (and unemployment after Allied victory), a disastrous American tour with Duke Ellington and more. He was a spendthrift, a near-illiterate, a dandy, a naïf and a scoundrel, and it's hard to believe he was real, although his sublime recordings and a film clip with the Hot Club provide sufficient evidence that he somehow was. He found a place in the traditional jazz canon like no other European, and none of the explanations truly suffice. As John Szwed muses in *Crossovers*, "In Django's case street logic had it that his great abilities stemmed from the fact that either (a) he was a Gypsy, a member of a pariah caste, and therefore homologous to black; or (b) Gypsy culture and black-American culture shared more than either did with white Euro-American culture." These provocations are fascinating, but they are also speculative. How did this Gypsy assume an exalted space in an otherwise all-American traditional jazz canon? Such a query should invite a biographer to hit the ground with some demystifying facts or researched ruminations.

When Andrés Segovia heard Django play, he asked him, 'Where can I get that music?' 'Nowhere,' came the reply. 'I've just composed it!'

Or at least some good gossip, but even that requires documentation. Reinhardt the legend has thrived, but Reinhardt the historical figure is hard to reach. French jazz violinist Stéphane Grappelli taught Django how to write a little in adulthood, and all he had to show for it was one semi-coherent letter. He disowned in court his one published interview and left behind little more than scratchy records, old reviews of his concerts and the fading memories of those who knew him. Reinhardt's recordings are well-known, and his percussive guitar style is still imitated and revered, but we know very little about the man himself. He was a prototype for Sean Penn's scumbag savant in Woody Allen's *Sweet and Lowdown*—a film that mystified and mythified the real Reinhardt even further. Apart from some colorful anecdotes and jangling arpeggios, the Gypsy remains a mystery.

One Reinhardt performance impressed the initially disdainful guitarist Andrés Segovia enough to inspire the classical virtuoso to ask the jazz icon, "Where can I get that music?" "Nowhere," Reinhardt retorted. "I've just composed it!" The Gypsy guitarist's genius never presented itself on the page. It only added to his mystique that he seemed to live by instinct alone, even though his astonishing musical logic was obvious to anyone who could appreciate it. It would be the task of others to explain exactly what he did and how he did it. Reinhardt could have been the most significant jazz musician to come out of Europe, but he was also the most underdocumented one since Buddy Bolden died unrecorded in an insane asylum. Anyone writing a Reinhardt biography faces an extraordinary story and a nearly insurmountable task, and it would require considerable literary skill to follow a subject who left such a scant paper trail. Dregni, a contributing writer for *Vintage Guitar* magazine, did his fieldwork and knows every string and fret of Reinhardt's instrument, but he is not the writer for the job. This book has been justly celebrated for all the rigorous original research Dregni has done on the Gypsy. But to attain this information, one has to slog through a considerable amount of wince-inducing prose. Some examples: "Here, outside the City of Light, was a city of blight." "While Les Halles—with its vast food markets—was the poetic belly of Paris, Pigalle was its penis." "Django and Stéphane jammed on them as though their hearts beat to an American foxtrot rhythm." "For Django, it was all a moveable feast eaten during a life on the move." "For Django and for jazz, World War II was the best of times and the worst of times." "Goebbels ordained that the capital was to be its old self, the City of Light even amid the darkness of war." Reinhardt was virtually incapable of playing a cliché, but Dregni writes plenty of them.

Dregni was apparently struggling with how to write a biography and maintain a consistent narrative as he went along. We are told that Reinhardt "preferred Armstrong's formidable playing over the erudite technique of the orchestra of Duke Ellington," only to learn 100 pages later that he "attempted to style his arrangements like his other hero, Duke Ellington." How did Ellington suddenly ascend in Reinhardt's pantheon? We are told more than once that Reinhardt took a Gypsy father's pride in his son's ability to steal silverware from hotel rooms, but buried in the middle

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of the book—in a well-researched account of Reinhardt's artistic and commercial triumphs in Vichy France—we stumble upon this little detail: "His mother was Jewish and he could forsee what that meant." This is the first and last we hear about the Jewishness of this Gypsy star of the occupied jazz circuit, an irony begging for pages of copy. We certainly shouldn't have to wait for the Gestapo to come knocking on page 155 to discover this in a book whose subtitle promises us "The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend." There simply isn't enough archival data to lean on to present Reinhardt whole without a more adept writer's imagination and skill to fill in the gaps. By the time Reinhardt dies on his way to go fishing, it is hard to mourn the death of a man we have barely gotten to know.

Reinhardt created an original style when he fused Gypsy musette with the swing of Ellington and Armstrong. But the European jazz musicians who came after World War II did not merely mine local folk music; they improvised according to the principles of Schoenberg, Stockhausen and other theorized clangor. Mike Heffley's *Northern Sun, Southern Moon: Europe's Reinvention of Jazz* investigates the music of many of these practitioners as a phenomenon distinct from their American counterparts. Pianist Cecil Taylor, born in the United States, continues to slam the keys and demonstrate the journey from Bud Powell to the New England Conservatory and beyond, pounding out European avant-garde jazz better than anyone on the Continent. Why do we need Joachim Kühn, Alexander von Schlippenbach, Ekkehard Jost, Peter Kowald and others discussed in Heffley's book when we have Taylor? The answer has something to do with a Hegelian theory of freedom and atonality, but before Heffley can canonize the European avant-gardists of his book, he characterizes the "smiling stage personae of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and many others" as "crafted for those they served as masters throughout history." This was the view of some bebop musicians and hipsters in the 1950s—pretty much the attitude summed up by James Baldwin's 1957 story "Sonny's Blues." Indeed, managers Joe Glaser and Irving Mills did put Armstrong and Ellington where they wanted them—faux jungles, mobbed-up clubs, at a distance from their white co-stars in films. Still, Ellington never played a chef, servant or hero's best friend, and Armstrong even played a gangster in *Artists and Models*. In America's post-Ellison moment of jazz studies, the master-slave dialectic posed by Heffley has been negated.

The European view of jazz is rather different, though, and that is the view of *Northern Sun, Southern Moon*. You have to hand it to Heffley: This is a man who knows his von Schlippenbach, his Jost, his Kowald. European jazz is certainly a subject important enough to justify substantial scholarly heavy lifting, and for anyone who wants to understand it, this is the definitive study. Distilled from a 1,757-page ethnomusicology dissertation directed by Anthony Braxton at Wesleyan, Heffley's book—trimmed to a Spartan 300 pages—is in the grand sweeping theoretical tradition of Durkheim and Weber, and one does not have to be persuaded by its argument or enjoy the music he champions to appreciate its heft. There is a certain jingoism about studying jazz as an exclusively American phenomenon, although one invites arguments when one tries to distinguish how essential the American—and African-American—influence has to be to call it jazz. Reinhardt might have been playing Gypsy music in cafe obscurity for the rest of his life if he hadn't fully intuited and appropriated the music of Louis Armstrong, whom he tried (and failed) to impress in an impromptu performance. "*Ach moune*!" Reinhardt cried in a Romany expression when he first heard Armstrong. Translation: My brother!

The German musicians discussed in Heffley's study find kinship with late period John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman (the latter evidenced in *Colors*, Coleman's fascinating 1996 duet with Kühn). But the German Emanzipation movement Heffley meticulously documents is not only an emancipation from rhythmic and harmonic structure but from swing and the blues. This is an Emanzipation proclamation of an ironic kind, a relinquishing of a distinctly African-American musical aesthetic; some of the European musicians covered in this book reject the word "jazz" altogether, a semantic distinction welcomed by jazz traditionalists in America. It's hard not to be unsettled by this German erasure of black influence, which Heffley neither judges nor endorses but studies rigorously.

GETTY IMAGES

Old World meets New: Django Reinhardt, Duke Ellington and musicians, 1939

If you like swing, blues and melody, you won't like the music discussed in these pages, but these European movements—with all their noise—are vital, seldom acknowledged elements of jazz history, and it is unlikely that anyone will cover it as thoroughly as Heffley. What finally emerges from all this noise is an attempt to dismantle ethnic and geographical boundaries, as much as it assaults harmony, rhythm and comfortable decibel levels. Heffley's book examines what happens when jazz is displaced from its native land, leaving swing and the blues behind. As the East German critic Bert Noglik put it, "Jazz, its background as an African-American idiom, has developed into a global musical language." But there are many ways to embrace musical revolutions, and there were some musicians in America who did not feel the need to choose. Charles Mingus, who had internalized the atonal scores of Schoenberg as a teenager in Watts while steeped in blues and bop, could be trans-idiomatic and swinging at the same time. Before any of the European improvisations documented in Heffley's book took place, Mingus was arguing for a global musical language in a *Down Beat* manifesto back in 1951. "All music is one," he wrote.

Before jazz could go international, though, it had to become national, and the journey from Storyville to St. Louis and beyond happened on riverboats. The music played on these boats has long been the stuff of legend. "There's been so much that's been written and sung about the Mississippi, all romantic and wonderful somehow," recalled clarinetist Sidney Bechet. "But there's a lot of misery there too, a lot of the bad times and the hurt that's been living there beside the river." Still, said Bechet, "that music was so strong, there was such a

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want for it that there was no moving away from it." The romance, the misery and the music of migration are all captured in William Howland Kenney's *Jazz on the River*, a book that narrates a history that couldn't be captured merely by doting on scratchy records, tattered scores and old reviews. It was commonly known that jazz was born in New Orleans and made its way up the Mississippi, but until Kenney no one had investigated the makers of the boats and the conditions of the musicians who worked on them. And no study before this one ever charted that northern migration so that we can appreciate the artists and how their musical communities were formed, giving us new ways to appreciate the Pittsburgh of Billy Strayhorn, Art Blakey and Mary Lou Williams, the St. Louis of Miles Davis.

We get to know the riverboat manufacturing Streckfus family, in need of entertainment and cheap labor, and the black musicians who were glad to accept the $35 a week to get the hell out of Louisiana. Some bands were integrated decades before Benny Goodman desegregated his band, a liminal realm where Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke could at least get a chance to check each other out. "When perceived from the middle of the Mississippi River, North peacefully coexisted with South, Confederate gray with Union blue, and whites with blacks," writes Kenney. "Riverboat jazz reaffirmed confidence in the United States." This is not merely a Mark Twain–style allegory but a startling historical phenomenon, a demonstration of how jazz could desegregate Americans nearly half a century before civil rights became the law of the land.

It was not always lovely to be on a raft, of course. Beiderbecke had neither the reading chops nor the discipline to make the gig, and while Armstrong had a crucial early job working in Fate Marable's band, he was frustrated by the rigidity of the format and was glad when he got a chance to leave. When the young Armstrong's sight-reading abilities were later tested by another bandleader, Fletcher Henderson, after Armstrong responded to a pianissimo marking—an instruction to play softly—with a blaring note, he said, either joking or dodging, that he thought "pp" meant "pound plenty." Those jokes got him out of trouble many a time. This story has been told in every Armstrong book, but until Kenney's we never got to feel what that or the riverboat gig was actually like. What we get in this book, with lucid prose and meticulous research, is a geographical and cultural context for the figures who would eventually become canonical, providing a vital new backdrop for music and anecdotes that had seemed well trodden.

The musicians were overworked, underpaid and didn't always even get sleeping quarters on the excursion boats. They were required to be excellent sight readers, but the most significant music to come out of those bands couldn't be notated. The teenage Armstrong's improvisational impulses might have put him at odds with Marable, but it only made him want to swing harder. The riverboats were as repressive as they were crucial. Kenney's book functions as labor history as much as it does an aesthetic trajectory, laying out all the arbitrary forces, from the market to racial segregation, that somehow combined and floated upstream, allowing Armstrong to get some essential early exposure before he could get off the score and onto his own flights of fancy. As the music made its way north, the riverboats provided the first sounds of that music to Ma Rainey and W.C. Handy. "St. Louis Blues" couldn't have been written without the boats carrying the New Orleans musicians up the river.

At the end of the book, Kenney quotes a scene from Ellison's *Invisible Man* to give us a flavor of those wonderful, terrible river-

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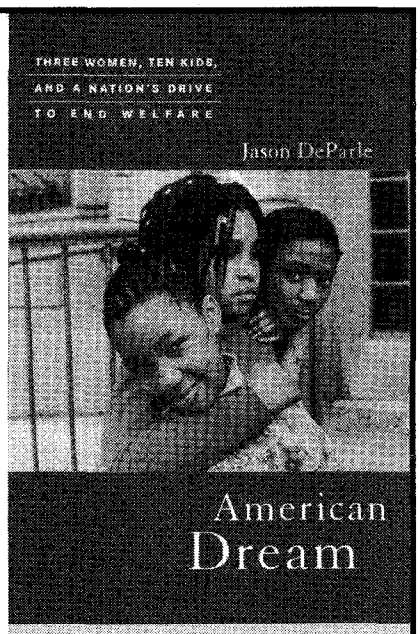

Jason DeParle, *American Dream*.

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boat days. In the beginning of the novel, sharecropper Jim Trueblood profits from telling a compelling but dubious tale of father-daughter incest. Trueblood's tale is as ribald as a Fats Waller lyric, but it's also as artful. Before he tells his story, he recalls hearing the music wafting from the riverboats: "Then the boats would be past and the lights would be gone from the window and the music would be goin', too," he says, before comparing the music's enticement to a "plump and juicy" woman "kinda switchin' her tail 'cause she knows you watchin' and you *know* she know." In a more exalted moment, but still celebrating the trickster spirit represented by Trueblood, Ellison lamented on a 1965 PBS show that "one of the most intriguing gaps in American cultural history sprang from the fact that jazz, one of the few American art forms, failed to attract the understanding of our intellectuals.... It is a fact that, for all their contributions to American culture, no Edmund Wilson, no T.S. Eliot, no Cowley or Kazin has offered us insights into the relationship between this most vital art and the broader aspects of American social life." Heffley did journeyman work investigating how jazz got imported—and maybe distorted—when it collided with broader aspects of European life. As for actually placing jazz in its historical and cultural context in America, Kenney is among the scholars who have explored exactly what Ellison had asked for, with a scholar's mission to bring the music into a geographical, economic and social investigation of what was going on around it, that same sound that Ellison's Trueblood heard from those riverboats. That cultural moment of public intellectuals Ellison yearned for forty years ago is long gone, and the moment of the music Kenney studied is even further away. Now that New Orleans stands in danger of losing its jazz archives amid the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the starting point of that riverboat journey—the Storyville whorehouses, the dance halls and the street parades where it all began—will float even further into the realm of myth. Now there are more books than ever to document a world that recedes every day. But before there was Ellison there was another writer, one who named an age after jazz, whose words are now particularly poignant. So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. ■

The Dying Animal

MICHAEL WOOD

MEMORIES OF MY MELANCHOLY WHORES.
By Gabriel García Márquez. Translated by Edith Grossman. Knopf. 115 pp. $20.

There was a certain amount of confusion among the fans and celebrity watchers when this new novella by Gabriel García Márquez appeared in Spanish. He had just published the first volume of his autobiography and was supposed to be working on a second. Was this it? The title included the word *memoria*, which can mean "memoir" just as easily as it can mean "memory." The book was written in the first person, and it was about an elderly Latin American writer. But then the differences, on inspection, began to overtake the similarities. The writer in the novella is not a novelist; he doesn't live in Mexico City but in an unnamed Colombian port that has all the signs of being Barranquilla (where the young García Márquez attended boarding school and later worked as a journalist). And he is not just elderly but old; he turns 90 in the course of the story. García Márquez, by contrast, at 77 (when the Spanish version was published last year), is a mere juvenile.

But the confusion has a critical interest, because the autobiography had plenty of fiction in it, in the shape of apocryphal stories, characters recognizable from the novels and indeed whole passages quoted verbatim from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The implication was not that the autobiography was untrue but that García Márquez himself had lived among the scenery and personnel of his fictional work and that much of what he experienced as life was already fictionalized. There are stories, he says, that are not invented on paper: "Life invents them." *Memories of*

Michael Wood is the Charles Barnwell Straut Professor of English at Princeton University. His most recent book is Literature and the Taste of Knowledge *(Cambridge).*

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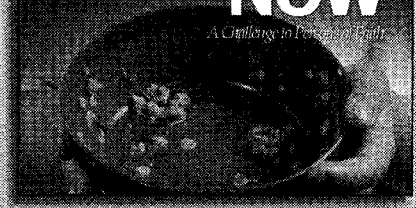

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My Melancholy Whores is an exploration of old age and desire, and life certainly invented most of the stories we tell about both of them.

Informed by a doctor that the pain he has is natural for his age (he is 42 at the time), the writer in the novella says, "In that case...what isn't natural is my age." The doctor gives him a pitying smile and says, "I see that you're a philosopher." In one of the story's many expert plays on identical or closely related words, the writer tells us this "was the first time I thought about my age in terms of being old." Every age, even the lowest, has to do with being old. The question is: how old? Or how far from death? Curiously, when the writer uses the phrase "my true distance from death," he means almost no distance at all. Happily, he gets a breather; and by the end of the book, since he now counts in decades rather than years, he is looking forward to dying "any day after my hundredth birthday."

Like many of García Márquez's fictions, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* tells two stories. One is a simple, sentimental tale about a man who finds true love very late in life. The other is a bitter but still romantic narrative about a man who exchanges one kind of loneliness for another. He likes the second loneliness better and he calls it being in love, but his self-absorption has hardly been touched. The remarkable moments in the book occur when the two stories cross or start talking to each other.

Our narrator is a longtime columnist and occasional music critic for a local newspaper. He describes himself as "ugly, shy, and anachronistic," says his life is "wasted" and insists he has no talent for narration or dramatic composition. None of these apparent disadvantages affects his self-esteem or sense of entitlement, and for his ninetieth birthday he decides to make himself a present of "a night of wild love with an adolescent virgin." He calls a madam he knows and after some hesitation—on practical rather than moral grounds, of course—she takes on his commission and finds him a 14-year-old girl. The girl is sedated and asleep when our writer arrives at the brothel, and in fact she doesn't wake up at all during the night. He contemplates her naked body, nudges her and caresses her, but does nothing more. He leaves at five in the morning, having discovered, as he puts it, "the improbable pleasure of contemplating the body of a sleeping woman without the urgencies of desire or the obstacles of modesty." Well, he has discovered more than that: "my great love," "the first love of my life at the age of ninety," "the beginning of a new life at an age when most mortals have already died"—the cause and subject, in other words, of this *memoria*, this memoir and these memories.

Somewhere around here we realize that the writer's disavowals of talent have been a bit coy and that he's a better narrator than he would have us believe. His supposedly wasted life sets the stage perfectly for the sudden, redemptive moment he has in store for us. At 90 he is not only a man who can ignore his age but a man who enters youth at the latest possible date. He blushes when he talks about his nights; he thinks of joining a student revolt and carrying a placard saying: "I am mad with love." His columns become saturated with thoughts of the girl, and his readers take them as models for love letters. But the girl never wakes up. She works at sewing buttons during the day and reappears at the brothel at night when the writer comes to call. Someone, perhaps the girl, perhaps a ghost, scribbles a mysterious message on the mirror over the sink: *El tigre no come lejos* ("The tiger does not eat far away"). The writer reads to the girl and offers her gifts, imagines a relationship through the movements of her sleeping body. At least once she talks in her dreams. She says, "It was Isabel who made the snails cry," but the conversation doesn't go far, and the writer thinks that this is "when the last shadow of a doubt disappeared from my soul: I preferred her asleep." The girl is lost for some time in the turbulence surrounding the murder of one of the madam's other clients in another room, but then she is found again. The writer is jealous because he thinks she must have slept with someone else in the meantime, and in a fury he smashes up the room at the brothel. The girl curls up on the bed, continues to present her back and shows no sign of waking. The madam has a wonderfully unexpected reaction: "My God! What I wouldn't have given for a love like this!" Peace is made, and our writer settles down with the girl to await his next decade, but he never sees her awake. She is the sleeping beauty who continues to sleep, and he is the aged prince who doesn't need to rouse her.

Both the sentimental tale and the bitter story are readable in Edith Grossman's able English version, but she has chosen to underplay the self-conscious element of writing and leans toward the sentimental. Hence the vanishing of "memoir" into "memories," not only in the title but

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at various points in the text where "memoir" is clearly meant, and hence the word "melancholy" for "sad," which makes good alliterative music but sings a new song. There is no reason to assume the whores in the book are anything but sad: because they are poor, because they grow old too soon, because they belong to a world where only men get to act out their dreams of purity and lust. It's striking that within the novella the title refers not to the story our writer tells but to a book he once thought of writing: an account not of his new love but of his old habits, "the miseries of my misguided life," his nights in the brothels and the sex he never had without paying for. "We had made love without love," he says of these old libidinous sessions, "half-dressed most of the time and always in the dark so we could imagine ourselves as better than we were." It's because the new book has the title of the old project that we have to wonder how much has changed.

In a characteristic quiet irony García Márquez suggests that the strange final idyll of the happily watching prince and the eternally sleeping girl, while morally an improvement on the violation of a minor, leaves the man's old sexual fantasy and inhibition exactly where they were: sex or love but never both. One of the writer's old friends, a prostitute he used to frequent long ago, tells him to give up what she calls *romanticismos de abuelo*, "grandfather's romanticism." "Don't let yourself die without knowing the wonder of fucking with love." This is one of the points where the two stories cross. The man who never knew love because he was always hanging out in brothels is now dominated by a single passion—and again hanging out in a brothel. But would he be in love if he had slept with the girl, and isn't he far more interested in his own new feelings than in a new relation, however miraculous? Perhaps anything that makes us foolish can also make us young, and we may think the whole story is just another way of saying that age has nothing to do with being old. ■

The Tower of Babel

LEE SIEGEL

SAVAGE SHORTHAND: The Life and Death of Isaac Babel.
By Jerome Charyn. Random House. 213 pp. $24.95.

There are two Isaac Babels: Lionel Trilling's Babel and Cynthia Ozick's Babel. The critic's and the novelist's two interpretations of the great Russian-Jewish writer—who rode with and wrote about the Cossacks, and who was murdered by Stalin in 1940, in gratitude for Babel's allegiance to the Revolution—are also two different versions of American Jewishness.

If you're the type of person given to lamenting the deterioration of serious reading and writing, here's one way you can lift your spirits: Read Trilling's famous introduction to the 1955 English translation of Babel's *Red Cavalry*, a collection of short stories inspired by Babel's experiences with the Cossacks. Trilling's offering has got to be one of the most obtuse literary essays ever written. It would never have made it into print today.

Of course, Trilling had a prodigious and unique literary mind. Essays like "Reality in America" and "On the Teaching of Modern Literature" make you recall that there was a time when literary critics didn't just review books; they rubbed their intellect against society until the sparks flew. *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Trilling's masterpiece, is a brilliant intellectual synthesis and an outpouring of original ideas. But maybe that book is so memorable because it was animated by Trilling's own problem with authenticity.

In his short and impressionistic, but essential, biography of Isaac Babel—the only one we have—Jerome Charyn writes appreciatively about Trilling's essay on *Red Cavalry*, and he never tries to refute or correct it. What interests Charyn is the way Trilling used Babel to try to escape from the burden of being Lionel Trilling. Such psychological delving fits nicely into *Savage Shorthand*, which is an attempt to excavate Babel from his own concealing nature, from the secretive times he lived in and from the enigmatic circumstances of his death. Charyn is a wonderful novelist, and his brief speculations about Trilling's buried motives is a deft leitmotif in his almost novelistic account of Babel's life.

As Charyn observes, Trilling's whole

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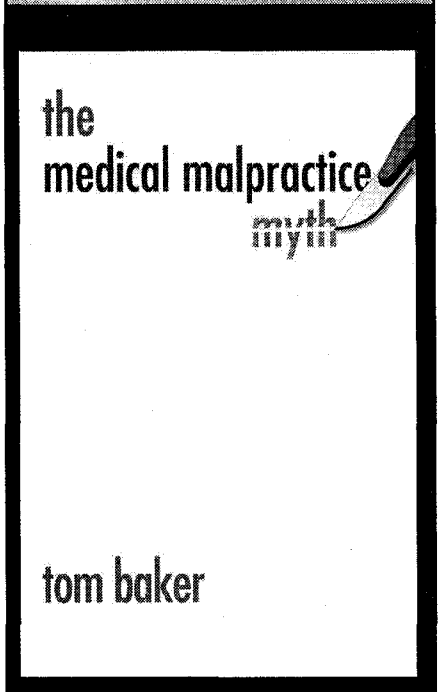
—Senator Richard J. Durbin



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career seems to have been one long flight from Jewishness into his impersonation of an Oxford don—"an Anglo-Saxon golem," as Charyn mordantly puts it. Charyn refers to Trilling's well-known regret over not being able to make a career as a novelist, and to his struggle with depression. He alludes to Trilling's avowals, in his now-published journals, of timidity, sexual repression and despair. In Charyn's view, Trilling displaced his longing to be a creative man of action—a novelist rather than an intellectual—onto Babel.

There is indeed something to the idea that Trilling was projecting onto Babel vicarious fantasies of macho artistic freedom. According to Trilling, the Cossacks enthralled the Odessa-born writer, who first made his name with wonderful stories about that Black Sea city's Jewish gangsters. Babel, Trilling wrote, admired "the boldness, the passionateness, the simplicity and directness—and the grace" of the soldiers in the so-called Red Cavalry. Not only that, but Trilling astonishingly argued that "in the stories of the Red Cavalry Babel submits the ethos of the intellectual to the criticism of the Cossack ethos [and] intends a criticism of [Babel's own] ethos not merely as an intellectual but as a Jew."

And why was Babel so drawn to such qualities in the first place? Trilling draws his answer straight out of the Freudian playbook. Reading Babel's short story "First Love" as the recounting of a real event, Trilling attributes Babel's enchantment with the Cossacks to that tale's central event. "Babel had seen his father on his knees before a Cossack captain on a horse, who said 'At your service,' and touched his fur cap with his yellow-gloved hand and politely paid no heed to the mob looting the Babel store." Trilling's diagnosis: "The sons of such men have much to prove, much to test themselves for, and, if they are Jewish, their Jewishness is ineluctably involved in the test." Ineluctably, no less. For the Jewish don this was the fundamental reason that Babel sustained his admiration for the Red Cavalry, despite the fact that he witnessed the Cossacks murdering and raping Jews, and pillaging their houses and synagogues. In Trilling's eyes—there is no delicate way to say this—Babel was a self-hating Jew and a self-hating intellectual who, as Trilling naïvely did, located the source of artistic creativity in feral vitality.

It's hard to contest Charyn's subtle insinuation of Trilling's projection onto Babel of Trilling's own shame-ridden self, hidden under the British manner, beneath the defensive, sniffy, faux-Edwardian prose. Charyn accepts Trilling's embarrassing self-exposure as a valid means of doing literary criticism and goes on to call the introduction "dazzling." Unfortunately, he never mentions Cynthia Ozick's attack on Trilling; in fact, he barely mentions Ozick at all.

Ozick had briefly been Trilling's student at Columbia, and she has written with some passion about how she felt Trilling snubbed her—maybe her origins in Brooklyn rather than Bloomsbury had something to do with it. "He was a Jew of the ghetto," Trilling writes of Babel, adding distastefully, "As a boy—so he tells us in his autobiographical stories—he had been of stunted growth, physically inept, subject to nervous disorders." But as Ozick pointed out in a brilliant, corrective essay published in *The New Republic* a decade ago, Babel was not at all the figure Trilling thought he was. Trilling's former student had something that the teacher lacked at the time he wrote his essay on Babel: Babel's private journals.

Lionel Trilling famously claimed that Babel admired the Cossack soldiers for their 'grace.' In fact, Babel was horrified by their brutality.

Babel had been "rehabilitated" by the Soviets in the 1950s, and his daughter Nathalie had immigrated in 1961 to the United States, where she spent the next decades overseeing the publication of everything Babel had written that she could get her hands on. Among the things she shepherded into print were Babel's journals—or his "diary," as they're sometimes called—excerpts of which were first published in 1975 and appeared in English in their entirety in 1995, when they provided the occasion for Ozick's essay.

Reading the journals, Ozick discovered that Trilling had been wrong on several counts. For one thing, Trilling believed Babel had joined up with the Cossacks to fight, but in fact Babel rode with them as a correspondent for a Soviet newspaper. For another, far from being a "Jew of the ghetto," Babel came from an affluent family, a fact he was understandably reluctant to mention as an ardent supporter of the Revolution. And his stories were hardly "autobiographical." As Charyn points out—a little too emphatically—Babel was a mythomaniac who loved to make up stories about his life. The Cossack captain's humiliation of Babel's father couldn't have happened the way Babel described it in his fiction. As Ozick tersely puts it, "There was no Babel store." Babel's father sold agricultural machinery, which he kept locked away in a warehouse.

Most important of all, Ozick learned that Babel didn't think very highly of the Cossacks. He did not regard the figure of the Cossack, to borrow her quote from Trilling's introduction, as "'the man as yet untrammeled by civilization, direct, immediate, fierce...the man of enviable simplicity, the man of the body—the man who moved with speed and grace.' In short, 'our fantasy of the noble savage.'" Rather, the Cossacks' brutality appalled him. "They all say they're fighting for justice and they all loot," Babel wrote. "I ride along with them, begging the men not to massacre prisoners.... I couldn't look at their faces, they bayoneted some, shot others, bodies covered by corpses, they strip one man while they're shooting another, groans, screams, death rattles." "We are destroyers...we move like a whirlwind, like a stream of lava, hated by everyone, life shatters, I am at a huge, never-ending service for the dead...the sad senselessness of my life." And again: "I am an outsider.... I don't belong, I'm all alone, we ride on...five minutes after our arrival the looting starts, women struggling, weeping and wailing, it's unbearable, I can't stand these never-ending horrors." The Cossack "ethos," Ozick rightly concludes, was something that repelled Babel. It was not a way of being that he wished to emulate, let alone a "criticism" of Babel's own nature.

But after giving Trilling a taste of his own professorial tweeds, Ozick proceeds to construct another fantastical projection of Babel. For her, "Babel's journal is a Jewish lamentation." It is a conscious record of "the calamity (to say it in the most general way) of Jewish fate in Eastern Europe." For Ozick, the lesson of Babel's bloody, disturbing sojourn among the Red Cavalry is twofold: Jewishness is fate, and Babel got suckered by the Revolution into thinking that the Bolsheviks were about to create a new world in which the old persecutions would disappear.

As for why Babel chose to ride with the Cossacks in the first place, she reiterates Trilling's interpretation even as she revises it. Babel, Ozick writes, was an "intrepid wanderer; as trickster, rapscallion, ironist; penniless, slippery, living on the edge, off the beaten track, down and out; seduced by the underlife of Paris, bars, whores,

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cabdrivers, jockeys. All this suggests Orwellian experiment and audacity. Babel relished Villon and Kipling and was delighted to discover that Rimbaud, too, was an 'adventurer'.... For Babel, lamp oil and fearlessness were not antithetical. He was a man with the bit of recklessness between his teeth." Intellectuals and bookish Jews can fight, too! But like Trilling, Ozick can't imagine that Babel rode among the Cossacks with his eyes open, blinded neither by insecurity nor by schoolboy yearning for adventure.

Babel is certainly a problematic figure, and too often his bedeviling qualities get passed over as the colorful traits of a picaro. Probably part of the reason writers spare Babel when trying to make sense of his life and work is that, at a certain moment, Babel struck a daring, subtle blow for truth during the height of Stalin's terror. At the Soviet-sponsored International Congress of Writers, held in Paris in 1935, Babel ironically quipped that in the Soviet Union the only right denied to authors was "the right to write badly." He himself had won early fame in 1924 with some stories from the Red Cavalry, and also with his tales of the fictional Benya Krik, king of the Jewish gangsters, who held sway in Odessa's Jewish quarter, the Moldavanka, where Babel was born in 1894. (Charyn himself writes wry, gripping, offbeat novels about gangsters in the Bronx.) Shortly after Babel's birth, his parents moved the family to nearby Nikolaev, where Babel witnessed the notorious pogrom of 1905.

Although, as Charyn writes, Babel had become so celebrated that people in Moscow began to imitate Benya Krik's Odessan slang, by 1928 he had almost completely stopped writing. Stalin had brought his fist down on artists and writers, and Babel seemed cowed into silence. But there were forces besides Stalin's repression working on Babel's psyche from within the writer himself. During several long stays in his beloved Paris, Babel rejected opportunities to exile himself to France, even though he spoke and wrote French beautifully, and was so admired by the cognoscenti there that Malraux insisted to Stalin that Babel be allowed to participate in the 1935 writers' congress. Yet instead of fleeing Russia, Babel left his wife and child in Paris, and returned to Stalin's inferno.

As Charyn tells it, Babel said that he needed the Russian atmosphere to write, but he wasn't writing, except for a brief burst of industry in 1937. What really seemed to dismay him was that his fame had not extended to France, beyond rarefied literary and intellectual circles. In Russia celebrity had gone to his head. From the mid-1920s on, he had been running with a fast crowd. By 1937 he had his wife, Zhenya, and daughter Nathalie in France; an ex-mistress and a child—whom his former paramour, a famous actress, forbade him to see—in Moscow; and a third child with a third woman, whom he called his "second wife," also in Moscow. Perhaps this emotional chaos was the overflow of blocked artistic energies, or the greedy egotism of a coddled man, or the desperation of a doomed man. But this vexing aspect of Babel's life is nothing compared to his relationship with the Cheka, Stalin's secret police.

What really unsettles you about Babel is that he did not seem able to resist close proximity to power. Most likely, as Charyn surmises, he planted the seeds of his demise when he began an affair with Evgenia Gladun, an adventuress and opportunist. Not long after Babel took up with her, she became romantically attached to Nikolai Yezhov, whom she married in 1931 and who became the head of the Cheka in 1936. It's not clear whether Babel's time with Gladun overlapped with Yezhov's,

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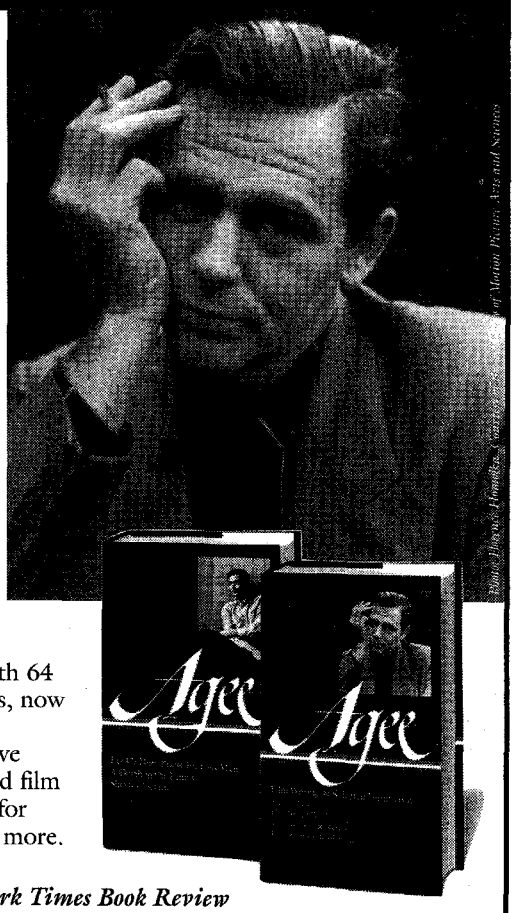

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but Gladun's continuing efforts to help Babel professionally—which he stupidly accepted—roused Yezhov to a permanent state of jealousy. You wonder whether Babel stayed close to Gladun in order to form a connection to Yezhov; after all, Babel had cultivated a friendship with Genrikh Yagoda, Yezhov's predecessor, accepting invitations from Yagoda to tour the torture chambers in the bowels of the Lubyanka—even, according to one of Stalin's biographers, sitting in with other writers to eavesdrop on interrogations. Vulnerability, egotism, malice, ambition? No one will ever know what Babel's motives were. Yezhov poisoned Gladun in 1938. He was arrested the following year by Stalin and almost immediately "confessed" that Babel had been plotting against the state.

What we do—or can—know is the extent of Babel's artistry. It isn't necessary to go to the journals to understand his moral position in *Red Cavalry*. On the evidence of the *Red Cavalry* stories, Babel was more resourceful, more diabolically ironic and subversive than either Trilling or Ozick suspected. You can't fully understand Babel unless you grasp the special strategy of Odessan-Jewish humor, the way it achieves its revenge on the world by proclaiming an ideal and then bringing down the roof both on the ideal and the joke teller. Trilling liked to associate Babel with Hemingway, Ozick with Kafka, but the more accurate comparison is with the German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, who loved to floridly express a romantic or heroic sentiment and then violently pull the rug out from underneath it. Heine, however, remained standing. The Odessan comedian tumbles along with the high sentiment, as if the only honest and convincing criticism of life were one that left nobody standing, including the critic.

Exploring Babel's story "My First Goose," Trilling quotes Babel's description of Savitsky, the Cossack brigade commander. Trilling writes that Savitsky's "male grace is celebrated in a shower of epithets—we hear of the 'beauty of his giant's body,' of the decorated chest 'cleaving the hut as a standard cleaves the sky'...of his long legs, which were 'like girls sheathed to the neck in shining riding boots.'" For the pathetically projecting Trilling, Babel is writing in a spirit of "admiration and envy." He adds: "Savitsky's grace is a real thing. Babel is not ready to destroy it by any of the means that are so ready to the hand of the intellectual confronted by this kind of power and charm." By academic passive-aggression, that is.

May I suggest that any readers who once took a course with Trilling and got a C-minus or something like that go immediately to the Columbia registrar and have your grade changed? Savitsky is in charge of a group of anti-Semitic thugs who are raping and murdering Jews and Poles—who themselves are raping and murdering Jews—all through their campaign. How could Babel possibly associate this kind of homicidal madness with "power and charm," much less admire and envy it? He doesn't. He "destroys" it, if that's the right word, not by intellectual means but by artistic ones.

Babel turns the he-men Cossacks into sexually repressed men who sublimate their desire to fuck other men into acts of atrocity.

Babel is a Russian imagist, a prose poet who embeds meaning in a single swift phrase, or in repeated words, or in cognate incidents. In one famous *Red Cavalry* tale, a Cossack cuts an old Jew's throat. He gently puts the Jew's head under his arm, and (in Peter Constantine's superb new translation) "the Jew fell silent and spread his legs." Then the Cossack "carefully slit the old man's throat without spattering himself."

Commentators always drone on, when confronted with this passage, about how stunningly Babel exposes the sexual element in violence, and vice versa. This is nonsense—modernist boilerplate. Throughout the *Red Cavalry* stories, politically incorrect as it might strike some readers today, Babel turns the he-man Cossacks into sexually repressed men who sublimate their desire to fuck other men into acts of atrocity. Babel has the Jew spreading his legs to imply that the Cossack's murder is really a perversion of his desire to sexually penetrate his victim. Right at the start of the story, a Cossack commander is portrayed as being dressed like a woman, his cape vainly flung over his shoulder.

And how "ladylike" to worry about getting a little blood on your tunic! Throughout the story, too, Cossack singing is associated with an unmasculine quality, and so is the Cossack commander's absurd talk—feminine chatter—to plundered Jews and peasants about the shiny new agenda of the Comintern's Second Congress. In contrast, the old Jew submits to his fate silently, voicelessly, like—in the story's hidden perspective—a man. The tale ends with an old letter the narrator says he's found, written by the wife of one of Napoleon's invading soldiers and describing the birth of their son. In Babel's eyes—emotionally violent misogynist though he might have been—Russia's enemies create life, unlike Russia's current leaders.

The same "ethos" is expressed in "The Death of Dolgushov," whose narrator refuses to kill a dying Cossack who has begged Babel's persona to put him out of his misery, and also to take his personal effects and write a letter to his mother. Critics usually see this along Trilling's lines, as Babel's lacerating exposure of his own cowardice. Babel "means to speak adversely of himself in his Jewish character," the self-loathing Trilling absurdly writes. Nothing could be further from the truth. If the narrator rides over to the wounded man and stops and waits for him to hand over his effects, he will be killed by a barrage of machine gun fire. The story begins with a Cossack commander "seeking death," and all through it the Cossacks are associated with extinction; a man named Grishchuk asks: "What's the point of all the matchmaking, marrying, and in-laws dancing at weddings?" What's the point of life itself, in other words. The narrator thinks differently. The story ends with Grishchuk offering the narrator "a wrinkled apple" to eat. Death is the Cossacks' food.

In "My First Goose," Babel's revelation of the inner girl hidden deep inside the Cossacks' machismo reaches Dantesque heights of artistry. In another story, the narrator describes himself—also famously—as "begging fate for the simplest ability—the ability to kill my fellow man." Trilling predictably applauds this sentiment for its freedom from the intellectual's pitiful ironic undercutting. "The necessity for submitting to the test is very deeply rooted in Babel's psychic life." And this poor guy had tenure.

In fact, the narrator has expressed this odd desire in exasperation, after a Cossack upbraids him for absent-mindedly riding into battle with an unloaded gun. The narrator responds sarcastically. This so angers the Cossack that he threatens to shoot the narrator, who knocks his tormentor—an epileptic—to the ground and nearly kills him. Now, why would the narrator beg fate for "the simplest ability" if on the one hand it was so simple and if on the other he had already shown how easy it would be to kill the epileptic Cossack? The fact that

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Babel establishes the narrator's sarcastic tone earlier drives home the irony of his peculiar exclamation at the end of the story.

But Trilling and other critics read "My First Goose," in which the narrator kills a goose to eat, as Babel's demonstration to the Cossacks of his newfound ability to kill a man. From the beginning, however, Babel depicts Savitsky as a girl; in other words, as the very antithesis of the Cossacks' image of themselves. The Cossack leader "smelled of perfume and the nauseating coolness of soap." The narrator does write that he "envies" Savitsky's "steel and bloom," but by the end of the story, the bloom will be that of a woman, which will have undercut the steel. Savitsky is a classic case of homophobic projection. "So, you're one of those little powder puffs," he says to the narrator. "So, you think you can live with us, huh?" The Cossacks' hut has "garlands painted on it." The Cossacks themselves sit on "bundles of hay, shaving each other." One of them, a young man "with long, flaxen hair," like a young girl's, throws the narrator's suitcase into the street and then "turn[s] his backside to me" and farts. Another has some advice to the narrator about how he can win the Cossacks' hearts: "Ruin a lady, yes, the most cleanest lady, and you're the darling of the fighters!"

Men who smell like women, men who present their posteriors to other men, men who loudly advertise their ability to rape women as a test of manhood. No wonder Budenny, the renowned leader of the Red Cavalry, attacked Babel's stories about the Cossacks by trying to turn the tables on him and calling Babel a woman and a coward, among other similar epithets. As Charyn so intelligently quips, Budenny was a better literary critic than Trilling.

In the end, it turns out that the narrator can live very nicely with Savitsky's men. The story's subtle hilarity is that he wins their respect after merely killing a goose. Not other fighters. A goose—as if the narrator were objectifying the Cossacks' unconscious hatred of all things feminine or feline, or hinting at his possible skill as a rapist, like the rest of them. At the end of the story, the narrator reads his illiterate comrades a speech by Lenin from the newspaper. He "rejoic[es] in the mysterious curve of Lenin's straight line"—in Lenin's hidden meaning—but the Cossacks fail to grasp it, just as they would fail to grasp the meaning concealed in the artful folds of this tale, or fail to grasp their true nature as men. Finally, the narrator and the Cossacks go to sleep in a hayloft: "Six of us slept there warming each other, our legs tangled...." The narrator "dreamed and saw women in my dreams." The Cossacks, presumably, dream their repressed desires for each other.

Trilling could not accept his origins; Ozick seems to want to remain sentimentally rooted in hers. But Babel was neither Trilling's humiliated, insecure, self-hating Jewish weakling who harbored fantasies of cruel power, nor Ozick's comic-book adventurer incongruously driven by a parochial attachment to his Jewish heritage. He followed the Cossacks because he believed in a revolution that promised to end persecution of the Jews—that is, to end, in Babel's perspective, the suppression of his genius because of the fact that he was a Jew. He grew angry and disillusioned when he saw that nothing was going to change. Once upon a time, a Russian-Jewish writer, in Stalin's Russia, in an environment that melted thought and feeling, attained in his art a poise of identity that, eighty years later, eluded free and skeptical minds in a very different place. ■

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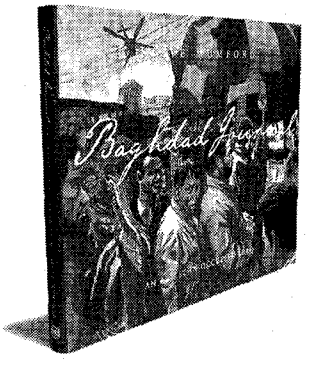

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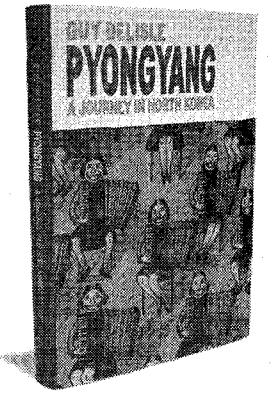

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In 1958, three years after James Agee suffered a terminal heart attack in a taxicab at 45, his friend and fellow film critic Manny Farber wrote an essay called "Nearer My Agee to Thee." The title captured Farber's characteristically mischievous attempt to wrest the real writer from his pious followers. "Even when he modified and showboated until the reader got the Jim-jams, Agee's style was exciting in its pea-soup density." In retrospect, Farber's effort to forestall sanctimony by objective assessment seems doomed, because Agee was such a prime candidate for literary sainthood: Handsome, tortured good looks, a cross between Montgomery Clift and Robert Ryan; body-punishing habits (alcohol, cigarettes, work jags, insomnia); a rebellious streak; many loves; obsession with integrity; and an early death. He belonged to that bruised, vulnerable, too-good-for-this-world poster club of actors, writers and rock stars whose authenticity was vouchsafed by premature passing.

The canonization of James Agee now appears to be complete with Library of America's two-volume set, which brings together his major works of fiction and film criticism, plus some high journalism and the *Night of the Hunter* screenplay. In a way, Agee is a perfect fit for the LOA, which, having published the obvious national classics by Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, etc., has since branched out to include "major minor" writers like Dawn Powell, H.P. Lovecraft and Carson McCullers, whose careers can be polished off in a volume or two. If these forays have exposed the LOA to criticism for diluting the house's founding standards, they have also provoked fruitful reassessments of marginal literary figures, while putting into readers' hands impeccably edited and elegantly printed texts that might otherwise be scattered or out of print.

Beyond his thanatoptic mystique, Agee's reputation rests on three claims: a hugely peculiar nonfiction tome, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; an impressive body of movie criticism; and a beautiful, heartbreaking novel, *A Death in the Family*. Having now bolted down almost 1,600 pages in the two volumes, I find it easier to agree that Agee's overall achievement merits its inclusion in the LOA's list than to know what to make of my lingering ambivalence toward this literary charmer.

Agee was born in 1909 and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee. When he was 7 his much-loved father, Jay, died in an automobile accident. This tragedy, and the grief and longing that ensued, helped shape his consciousness for life. His mother placed him in the St. Andrew's School, where his Anglo-Catholicism deepened under the influence of a teacher, Father James Flye, who became a surrogate father, mentor and friend. Agee, an excellent student, enrolled in the Phillips Exeter Academy and later was admitted to Harvard. At some point early on he developed that high-minded, solemn, strutting rhetorical style that would be his calling card and his nemesis. His literary gods were Joyce and Faulkner, and like Faulkner his first love was poetry.

While still a senior at Harvard, Agee wrote a parody of *Time* that landed him, after graduation, a job at *Fortune*, the business magazine recently started by Henry Luce. It is significant that Agee's entry into the Luce empire should have been by way of parody, because it epitomized his own troubled relationship to the journalistic teat. Sometimes he was Luce's fair-haired boy, sometimes the independent Joycean who refused to compromise with the media's expectations of clear copy. His journalistic bona fides gave him access to the larger world but also required him to feign an interest in business affairs. Sent to cover the Tennessee Valley Authority, he came back with *crème de la crème* descriptive prose that delighted his bosses. Agee, a fan of Pare Lorentz's documentary *The River*, with the orotund poetry of its voiceover ("Down the Rock, the Illinois and the Kankakee, the Allegheny, the Monongahela, Kanawha, and Muskingum...."), began his own piece with "The Tennessee River system begins on the worn magnificent crests of the southern Appalachians, among the earth's oldest mountains, and the Tennessee River shapes its valley into the form of a boomerang, bowing it to its sweep through seven states." *Fortune* sent him out again, with the great photographer Walker Evans, to report on cotton tenant farmers in Alabama, and he returned with hunks of the impenetrable rock or uncut diamond that would become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. His editors rejected it.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (the title comes from Ecclesiastes) is often glibly described as a classic, but if so, it must be one of the most unread and unreadable classics, one that educated people would rather compliment than suffer through. I tried twice in the past to get through it, and only managed a third time by taking on this reviewing assignment. What makes it so difficult to read is its thick fog of lyrical rhetoric and its total lack of forward momentum. It essentially breaks down into a series of prologues: For 400 pages Agee keeps starting the book, promising and backing away, introducing us to the ostensible subjects and then refusing to describe them. Originally called *Three Tenant Families*, it purports to be about three interrelated, hardscrabble clans: the Gudgers, the Rickettses and the Woodses. However, Agee had such scruples about any traditional approach that might conceivably exploit, betray or simplify these poor folk—the journalistic, the psychological, the aesthetic, the anthropological—that he was left with his hands tied, reduced to meditative mini-essays about roosters, mules and bedbugs, whose feelings would presumably not be hurt by his speculations. Some of these passages are marvelous, but all leave us frustratingly outside the main drama because he disdains to develop his subjects as characters. "There will be no time in this volume to tell much of their personalities," he says about the farm children, in a volume that seemingly has time for everything else. The book turns out to be more about Agee's shy, reverential feelings toward these salt-of-the-earth farmers, and his hunger to be liked by them, than about the people themselves. (How little

Phillip Lopate is the author of Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan *(Anchor) and the editor of the forthcoming anthology* American Film Critics: From the Silents Until Now *(Library of America).*

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he actually knew them becomes clear in *And Their Children After Them*, a valuable book written fifty years later by Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, who studied the families' survivors and progeny and uncovered incest, abuse and other goings-on.)

Despite Agee's reluctance to aestheticize his subjects, he ends up doing exactly that, as though he had come upon a set of intact Doric statues in an Alabama field. Of course he was competing with the daunting success of Walker Evans's photographs, which Agee adored. Even more than treating the tenant farmers as visually uncanny, his response was to imbue them with "sacramental" wonderment. Again and again, Agee has an epiphanic response to the tenant farmers, their "helpless innocence" and "beatitude." (At such moments, he sounds like an early Beat.) "The least I could have done was to throw myself flat on my face and embrace and kiss their feet," he wrote, not without a trace of self-parody, about encountering a young black couple on the road. When he is taken in by the Gudgers for the night after his car runs aground, he turns the anecdote into a biblical parable, as though he is an angel and they are hospitable patriarchs.

In a way, Agee remained primarily a religious writer. His Anglo-Catholic faith may have wavered, but his attraction to the spiritual, his attempt to convey the "predicaments of human divinity," as he put it, never faltered. His first book, a collection of poems called *Permit Me Voyage*, and his first extended fiction, a labored novel called *The Morning Watch*, about an adolescent altar boy having a crisis of faith, both attest to this preoccupation. But it was in his work of literary nonfiction, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (published in between *Permit Me Voyage* and *The Morning Watch*), that he really let loose.

The book is a catchall, with reveries, documents, inventories, surveys (Agee throws in his testy response to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire about the state of American literature). Though he began writing it when he was 26, there are times when he still comes across as a brilliant undergraduate who cannot stop compiling lists of his favorite enthusiasms, like the list of "unpaid agitators" that includes Blake, Céline, Ring Lardner, Jesus Christ, Freud and blues singer Lonnie Johnson. Alongside his celebration of tenderness, there are sudden, outrageously adolescent outbreaks of hostility against everyone who doesn't understand, especially those intellectuals back up North, who dare to fling around words like "sharecropper" and who have "absorbed every corruptive odor of inverted snobbery, marxian, journalistic, jewish, and liberal logomachia, emotional blackmail, negrophilia, belated transference, penis-envy...." Agee was of course a progressive, a self-described lapsed communist, but he mistrusted armchair radicals who did not go out into the field, as he did. He expresses frustration that he is unable "to blow out the brains with it of you who take what it is talking of lightly, or not seriously enough." Then he catches himself and admits: "Oh, I am very well aware how adolescent this is...."

You have to admire the freedom and wild stubbornness of the enterprise, but *Time*'s reviewer, who called it a "distinguished failure," may have gotten it right after all. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a failure, as Agee himself keeps telling us, but in the end, like Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, it's a fascinating ruin.

Assigned by *Fortune* to write a short piece about Brooklyn, Agee responded with "Brooklyn Is," a dizzying if pointless Whitmanesque catalogue, again rejected (for good reason) by the magazine's editors and which has only recently resurfaced in a little book put out by Fordham University Press, which optimistically labels it "a New York classic." You would think Luce had had his fill of Agee; but no, the two were made for each other, commerce and culture; St. Jim was Luce's class act, and soon he was back at *Time*, not only writing reviews but swinging into action whenever Luce needed a valedictorian on staff to strike the right lofty tone.

The death of FDR? The atom bomb? Get Agee. In an August 20, 1945, piece called "Victory: The Peace," Agee concludes: "Man's fate has forever been shaped between the hands of reason and spirit, now in collaboration, again in conflict. Now reason and spirit meet on final ground. If either or anything is to survive, they must find a way to create an indissoluble partnership." This sort of immensely talented blather (you try it sometime) belongs to the history of oratory and hack writing, in the highest sense.

Between 1942 and 1948, Agee juggled regular film critic chairs for *Time* and this periodical, sometimes filing conflicting reviews of the same film. His reviews in *The Nation* tended to be lengthier and more essayistic; those for *Time* were shorter, breezier and more

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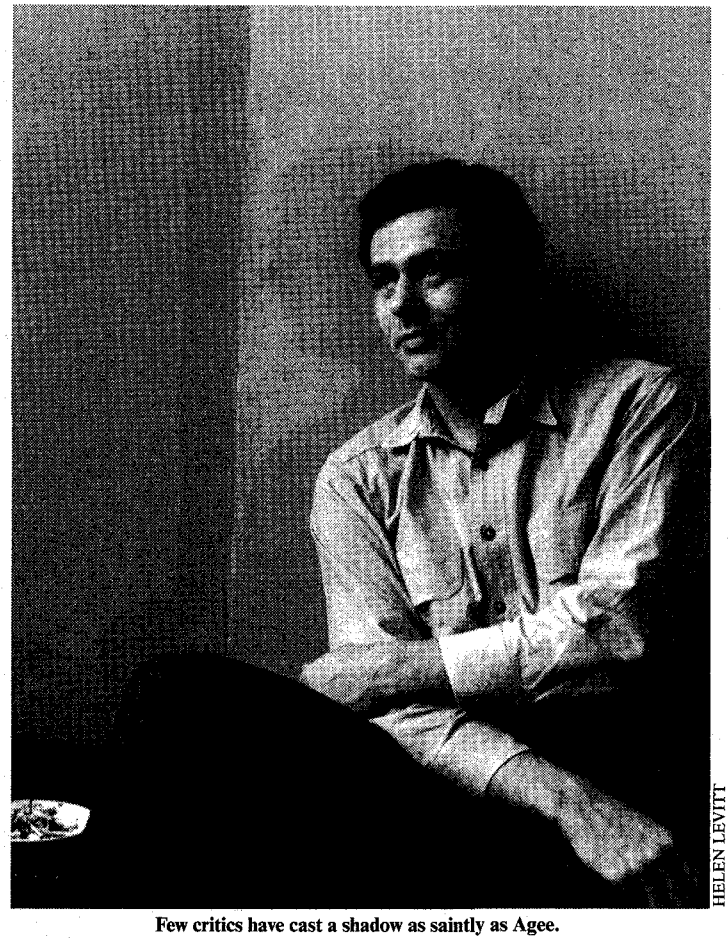
pinned to celebrities. Before he quit to write Hollywood screenplays, he left a substantial record of moviegoing that has inspired many reviewers since, while irritating the hell out of others.

I consider Agee one of the five major American film critics, the others being Otis Ferguson, Manny Farber, Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael. He is always stimulating to read on the movies, but of the five I disagree with him the most. It may well be a mistake to evaluate a critic on the basis of whether we share his judgments today, since we tend to forgive, in the name of period charm, certain melodramatic or sentimental false notes that would have rubbed a discerning contemporaneous viewer the wrong way. Still, again and again, he seems to get it wrong: "Welles has little if any artistry," Billy Wilder makes pictures that are like "a good Ph.D. thesis," Ida Lupino's great performance in *The Hard Way* has an "expression of strained intensity [that] would be less quickly relieved by a merciful death than by Ex-Lax." He has little of Farber's visual/formal acuity. Compare Farber's and W.S. Poster's complex appreciation of Preston Sturges with Agee's schoolmaster grading of Sturges as "a never-quite-artist of not-quite-genius."

Agee was always on-the-one-handing/on-the-other-handing in his movie reviews. His torturous judgments, particularly on the typical Hollywood product, became almost comic in their whirling-dervish pivots. Frequently he would settle the matter with a series of fuzzy, decorous moral encomiums such as "noble," "healthful," "pure." For instance, take this assessment: "I very much like Olivia de Havilland's performance [in *The Dark Mirror*]. She has for a long time been one of the prettiest women in movies; lately she has not only become prettier than ever but has started to act, as well. I don't see evidence of any remarkable talent, but her playing is thoughtful, quiet, detailed, and well sustained, and since it is founded, as some more talented playing is not, in an unusually healthful-seeming and likable temperament, it is an undivided pleasure to see."

Agee could never quit bemoaning the sorry state of filmmaking in the 1940s, which in retrospect looks like a pretty good era. He lacked Otis Ferguson's savvy enthusiasm for the collective craft of the well-made studio picture. More and more, Agee seemed dead set against commercial filmmaking, period. "Quite a few Hollywood people amused themselves as best they could in their captivity by making such nostalgic and amusing, if far from original, melodramas as *The Killers*, *The Big Sleep*, and *The Dark Corner*. Such harmless little slumming parties were treated by a number of critics, reviewers, and editorial writers as if they were a sinister mirror of American morals, psychology, society, and art." So much for film noir.



HELEN LEVITT

Few critics have cast a shadow as saintly as Agee.

While reviewing the film at hand, Agee always seemed to be willing another kind of movie into existence. He wanted, he said, to see pictures "made on relatively little money, as much at least by gifted amateurs as by professionals," shot on location, using nonprofessional actors, eschewing music scores, not "hindered by commercial work in studios." Impatient with set-building artifice, he became the prophet and avatar for a shoestring, independent cinema of social themes, which he found at the time in war documentaries and Italian neorealism. (He also lent his energies to this type of filmmaking, participating in Helen Levitt's *In the Street* and Sidney Meyers's *The Quiet One*.) Not surprisingly, Agee championed *Open City* and *Shoeshine* when they first debuted, mounting a very high horse indeed for the latter: "The elementary beginning of true reason, that is, of reason which involves not merely the forebrain but the entire being, resides, I should think, in the ability to recognize oneself, and others, primarily as human beings, and to recognize the ultimate absoluteness of responsibility of each human being. (I can most briefly suggest what I mean by a genuine recognition of human beings as such by recommending that you see the Italian movie *Shoeshine* and that you compare it in this respect with almost any other movie you care to name.) I am none too sure of my vocabulary, but would suppose this can be called the humanistic attitude."

It's astonishing that he could get away with this arch, Elizabethan style in a movie review. W.H. Auden famously applauded Agee's column in *The Nation* as "the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today," while acknowledging that "I do not care for movies very much and I rarely see them." No doubt Auden liked it that Agee was sticking it to Hollywood, while sustaining a formidably literate tone that the great poet placed "in that very select class—the music critiques of Berlioz and Shaw are the only other members I know—of newspaper work which has permanent literary value."

Agee thus became the darling of an educated middle-class readership that was suspicious of popular culture and cinephilia. He had little feeling for genre and little willingness to make excuses in its name. Nowadays, we might judge Minnelli's *The Clock* to be as fine a humanistic statement in its way as *Shoeshine*. But Agee, while pulling for it, could only see its virtues as hopelessly compromised and derided the "softness" of its intrusive music score and a romance plot he judged safe and saccharine.

Agee's distaste for Hollywood smoothness caused him at times to overrate the awkward and unpolished, as in his hype job for an intriguing, clumsy curiosity like

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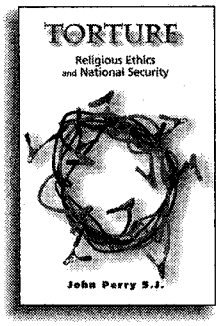
Man's Hope, Malraux's semi-documentary about the Spanish Civil War: "The heart-sick peasant in the disastrous plane is great movie poetry. The descent of the broken heroes from the desperate stone crown of Spain, as from a Cross, to the maternal valley, a movement so conceived that a whole people and a whole terrain become one sorrowing and triumphal Pietà for twentieth century man, falls possibly short of its full imaginable magnificence, considered syllable by syllable; but in its mass it is poetry even greater. Homer might know it, I think, for the one work of our time which was wholly sympathetic to him."

Whenever Agee mentions movie poetry, you can bet some crucifixion imagery will follow. Praising William Wellman's fine (now neglected) war film *The Story of G.I. Joe*, he says of Robert Mitchum's role: "And the development of the character of the Captain is so imperceptible and so beautifully done that, without ability to wonder why, you accept him as a great man in his one open attempt to talk about himself and the war, and as a virtual divinity in the magnificent scene which focuses on his dead body. This closing scene seems to me a war poem as great and as beautiful as any of Whitman's." It is not much of a stretch to see that Agee is conflating here the body of his dead father with that of Mitchum's and Christ's.

In his superbly accomplished autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*, Agee got the chance to dilate lovingly over the dead father's body, laid out after a car accident. *A Death in the Family* is modest in scale but rides a deep current of feeling. Agee had brooded over and tried to write this novel all his life; he knew the setting (the Knoxville of his childhood) and the characters (drawn from his immediate family and relatives) inside-out. In other words, he knew them far better than he ever did the tenant farmers in Appalachia, and he could tap their flaws and humors with far more honesty and without condescension. These are people who read Thomas Hardy, *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, agnostics who worry, but try not to show their horror, because one of them has gotten religion. The shrewd aunt who takes the young boy Rufus shopping, the boy's gullibility in letting himself be teased by bigger kids on the way to school, the unthinkable and all-too-real irrevocable loss of the father, whom we have already come to love, the young mother's vacillation between stoicism and hysteria, the alcoholic self-pitying uncle—all these and more are perfectly achieved. Though



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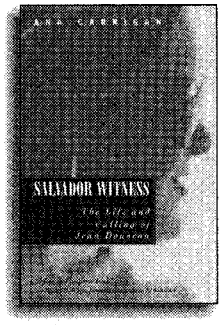

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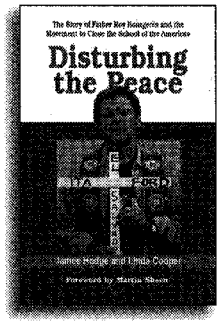

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Agee left the manuscript unfinished at his death, it doesn't need anything else; the emotional arc has more or less been completed. The novel was published posthumously in 1957, two years after he died, and won the Pulitzer Prize the following year. The book testified to Agee's successful digging-out of his narcissistic gulch and gaining an objective shifting perspective on a half-dozen protagonists. Perhaps the experience he had writing Hollywood screenplays (*The Night of the Hunter* and *The African Queen*) had strengthened his sense of structure, even as it made him less resistant to satisfying a bourgeois audience with accessible, vivid storytelling and fully developed characters.

Michael Sragow, the series editor, has done an excellent job selecting the texts and, in his biographical notes, keeping straight all of Agee's similar-named wives, Via, Alma and Mia. He has omitted Agee's poems (no great loss) and his other screenplays (then again, Agee was a much better novelist than a screenwriter). I may have wanted to see some correspondence, especially a few letters to Father Flye and Robert Fitzgerald, but I think we have enough to go by here. The totality suggests a hard-working, self-destructive writer with flashes of greatness and equal expressions of bluff and artist, whose poignant legacy deserves our continued and sympathetic, if unromantic, scrutiny. ■

Succès de Scandale

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH

LOLITA: 50th Anniversary Edition.
By Vladimir Nabokov. Vintage. 317 pp. $13.95.

THE TWO LOLITAS.
By Michael Maar. Translated by Perry Anderson. Verso. 107 pp. $23.

She was once a russet girl-child "smelling of orchards in nymphetland." Today she's a social and linguistic cliché: "Lolita. n. [after title character in Nabokov's novel *Lolita*] a pubescent girl who is sexually precocious," as *Webster's* coyly informs us. From the obsession with Lindsay Lohan and the Olsen twins in laddie magazines like *Maxim* to the teen temptress who comes on to Bill Murray in Jim Jarmusch's recent film *Broken Flowers*, Lolitas have become a ubiquitous—even banal—feature of American culture. And they come, of course, in endless colors and contours.

But whatever happened to that ur-nymphet who catapulted Nabokov into literary history? By a curious twist of fate, 50-year-old Lolita seems decidedly less consumable than her mainstream siblings, and she continues to foment considerable angst and trouble. To read *Lolita*, after all, is to enter the mind of a man irresistibly drawn to little girls, or "nymphets," as he prefers to call them. At the beginning of the novel, Humbert Humbert, sitting on a park bench, stares at a cluster of "perfect little beauties": "Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them play around me forever. Never grow up." Sunk deep in the fancies of his netherworld, Humbert lures the reader into his damp thicket of words. American readers in particular have long felt guilty about loving *Lolita*, and they have searched in vain for its moral lessons.

Nabokov was 56 years old when *Lolita* was published in September 1955, two years after he had completed the manuscript. He knew that she would be his "time bomb." Three little syllables that rocked the literary establishment. As soon as Jason Epstein, then a young editor at Doubleday, read the manuscript, he declared that Nabokov had written *Swann's Way* as though he were James Joyce. Epstein, however, promptly turned down the manuscript, citing its "outlandish perverseness." According to Nabokov's biographer, Brian Boyd, four other American publishers followed suit in the course of 1954. They feared a scandal, obscenity trials, even prison. And Nabokov sarcastically outlined his own account of *Lolita*'s misadventures in his magnificent 1956 afterword, "On a Book Entitled Lolita": "The four American publishers, W, X, Y, Z, who in turn were offered the typescript and had their readers glance at it, were shocked by *Lolita* to a degree...not expected." Publisher Z remarked that if he printed the book, both the writer and he would go to jail. Nabokov wasn't surprised, since he knew his tale of an affair between a middle-aged man and a barely pubescent girl explored one of the three "utterly taboo" themes in American publishing. (The two others were "A Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren; and the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106.")

It fell to a French editor, Maurice Girodias, the director of Olympia Press, to first publish *Lolita* in its original language—the English that the Russian-born writer had all but re-invented. In spite of a prestigious catalogue, Olympia Press was likely best known for rather sulfurous works, such as Henry Miller's *Plexus*, the Marquis de Sade's *The Bedroom Philosophers* and Georges Bataille's *A Tale of Satisfied Desire*, as well as what Nabokov would later term "the obscene novelettes which Mr. Girodias was hiring hacks to confect with his assistance." Thus, perhaps the first half of *Lolita*—the more erotically evocative—had led Girodias to hope for a certain success among aficionados of so-called "licentious" literature. As the eminent Nabokov scholar Alfred Appel Jr. recently reminisced, he "first discovered the novel in 1956...in a little book stand on the Left Bank, caught between *Until She Screams* and *The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe*."

Nabokov, who was unaware of Olympia Press's soft-core pedigree, would later claim he had been grossly misled, in a short text titled "*Lolita* and Mr. Girodias," published posthumously in *The Evergreen Review*, in 1998. Girodias, he complained, "wanted *Lolita* not only because it was well written but because (as Mme. Ergaz informed me on May 13, 1955) 'he thought that it might lead to a change in social attitudes toward the kind of love described in it.' It was a pious although obviously ridiculous thought but high-minded platitudes are often mouthed by enthusiastic businessmen and nobody bothers to disenchant them."

As it turned out, *Lolita*'s tribulations were only beginning. The novel had hardly been published when a police officer representing a French league of virtue called *La brigade mondaine* ("The socialite brigade") paid a visit to Girodias. He requested that the publisher hand over a number of titles—among them *Lolita*, which would soon be banned

Lila Azam Zanganeh, a contributor to Le Monde, *is the editor of the anthology* My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices, *which will be published by Beacon next spring. She is currently at work on a book about Nabokov.*

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by the very country that had welcomed its first printing.

John de St. Jorre narrates the nymphet's awkward first steps in his 1996 book *Venus Bound: The Erotic Voyage of the Olympia Press and Its Writers*: "*Lolita*, now banned in its English edition, was in the process of being translated quite legally into French for France's most venerable publishing house. And since *Lolita* could be legally brought into the United States once it was smuggled out of France, France was proving itself more pudibund than the Anglo-Saxon countries. Most absurd from a legal point of view was that the ministerial decree against Olympia's books could only invoke a law restricting subversive political publications." Girodias, of course, sought justice through endless trials and legal procedures that Nabokov testily coined "lolitigation"; the writer was more partial to poetic justice, and as far as he was concerned, his artistry was in no need of legal advocacy. *Lolita* was "a book that differed so utterly in vocabulary, structure, and purpose (or rather absence of purpose) from [Girodias's] other much simpler commercial ventures, such as *Debby's Bidet* or *Tender Thighs*," that it could defend itself on its own.

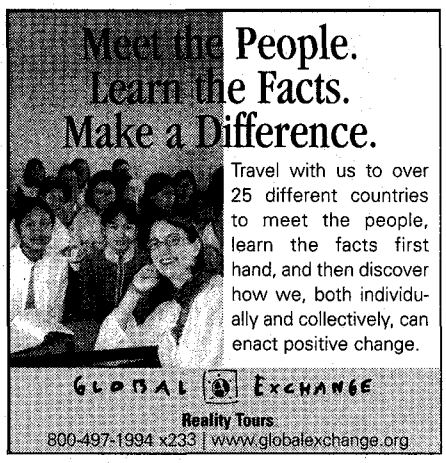
In 1958 the French ban on *Lolita* was lifted. After General de Gaulle came to power, however, Olympia's edition was suppressed yet again, even though by that time Gallimard had already published the novel in a French translation. And in one of the oddest turns in publishing history, the English version was definitively released only a year later from the grips of the French government's ban.

Meanwhile, in 1958, after countless hesitations in the United States, Putnam decided to publish *Lolita*. Contrary to expectations, there were no obscenity trials and the book was never banned, although numerous libraries piously refrained from acquiring it. But as the *parfum de scandale* spread throughout the country, *Lolita* climbed to the top of American best-seller lists and stayed there for more than six months. Nabokov would despise what he considered Girodias's vulgar salesmanship for the rest of his days, but he was well aware that Olympia's unstinting advocacy had won him admission to the international literary club, not to mention a substantial amount of money—enough, together with all other *Lolita* proceeds, for him to quit teaching at Cornell and move back to Europe, where he settled in Montreux, Switzerland, and lived until his death in 1977. "I have pondered the painful question whether I would have agreed so cheerfully to his publishing *Lolita* had I been aware in May, 1955, of what formed the supple backbone of his production. Alas, I probably would, though less cheerfully," Nabokov later admitted, rather graciously.

From the time it was first published, *Lolita* has produced visceral reactions, provoked in large part by Humbert's beguiling voice. "Reader! *Bruder*!" he exclaims, obliquely alluding to Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* ("*Mon semblable, mon frère!*") while tugging mischievously at the reader's complicity. In the mid-1950s, however, moral repulsion was a far more common response than literary rapture. The obsessions of Humbert Humbert, "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy," were an unabashed affront to the Victorian sensibilities of the book's first readers. They are the ones Nabokov addresses, not without a tinge of bitterness, in his 1956 afterword, where he reminds us that "obscenity must be mated with banality" and that a work of fiction exists, in his eyes, "only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm."

The truth is that when *Lolita* first appeared, few appreciated its artistic qualities, and the novel might well have vanished into oblivion had it not been for a sudden *cri de coeur* in a British newspaper. A little more than two months after the Parisian publication, in December 1955, Graham Greene selected *Lolita* as one of the three best novels of the year in the London *Sunday Times*. The critic John Gordon immediately replied in the *Sunday Express* that *Lolita* was the filthiest book he had ever read. The English public was scandalized by the devouring—and diabolically poetic—passion of the "pentapod monster" for his 12-year-old girl-child. Meanwhile, dozens of volumes were smuggled to the United States. Nabokov, for his part, almost inadvertently became the arch-iconoclast in what the French scholar Pascale Casanova has called the "World Republic of Letters." "Had not Graham Greene and John Gordon clashed in London in such providential fashion, *Lolita*—especially its second volume which repelled so-called 'amateurs'—might have ended in the common grave of Traveller's Favorites or whatever Olympia's little green books were called," Nabokov noted in his essay "*Lolita* and Mr. Girodias."

A staggering act of linguistic wizardry, *Lolita* was Nabokov's twelfth book but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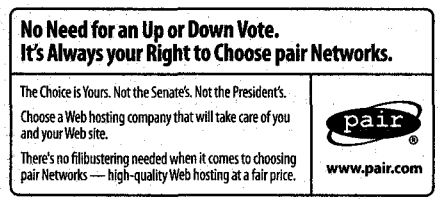
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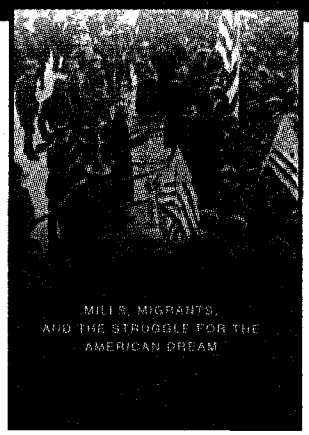

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only his third novel in English, following *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New Directions, 1941) and *Bend Sinister* (Henry Holt, 1947). As Humbert said of Lolita herself, "Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did." In 1939 Nabokov had composed a novella in Russian about a man who marries a little girl's mother merely to lay his hand on the girleen. The book was not published in Russian until 1989 (it was translated into English in 1996), but the sketch was there in Nabokov's imagination, and it would quietly grow "the claws and wings of a novel," as Nabokov wrote in his afterword. German critic and scholar Michael Maar claims in his book *The Two Lolitas* that the story already existed in the form of a short story published in 1916 by Heinz von Eschwege, who wrote under the pseudonym Heinz von Lichberg. Maar stops short of accusing Nabokov of plagiarism, instead suggesting three possibilities: coincidence, actual inspiration and "cryptoamnesia," whereby the "previous" text might have lingered in Nabokov's mind as a distant and muffled memory.

According to Nabokov's only son and best translator, Dmitri, the latter two are virtually impossible because Nabokov could hardly read in German. In any event, the resemblances between the works are negligible, especially at the level of language, where the novel's genius is concentrated. And in writing *Lolita*, Nabokov, who was teaching Russian literature at Cornell, did a prodigious amount of original research. On carefully organized index cards, he jotted down thousands of details regarding breast development, Tampax, acne, jukebox tunes and adolescent lingo. "He would do things like travel on the buses around Ithaca and record phrases, in a little notebook, from young girls that he heard coming back from school," writes Brian Boyd in his massive 1991 biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. But mostly Nabokov toiled away on his novel during summer trips he took with his wife, Véra, and Dmitri in the Great American West. He devoted the daylight hours to butterfly hunting, one of his abiding passions. On rainy afternoons or at night, to exorcise insomnia or during cross-country rides in his beloved Oldsmobile, he composed his novel in longhand, on those same immaculate index cards. The places the Nabokovs visited are the towns Humbert and "Lo" pass through on their epic journey: Telluride, Colorado; Afton, Wyoming; Portal, Arizona; Ashland, Oregon…

Once Nabokov had finished his manuscript in early 1954, he hid it in a drawer, scribbling notes to remind himself where he had concealed the time bomb. He planned at first to use a pseudonym in order to protect the good name of his employer, Cornell University. On one occasion, Véra, the most ardent of *Lolita*'s defenders, had to rescue the unfinished manuscript from the flames of the garden incinerator, where Nabokov was about to toss it. When *Lolita* finally came out in America, under Nabokov's own name, it was nothing short of a mad dream come true. But to Nabokov's initial disappointment, the American press was as unimpressed as the English and French. Edmund Wilson found it repugnant. (He later became a close friend of Nabokov and helped him publish stories in *The New Yorker*.) And there appeared in the *New York Times* this now notorious statement by Orville Prescott: "*Lolita*, then, is undeniably news in the world of books. Unfortunately, it is bad news. There are two equally serious reasons why it isn't worth any adult reader's attention. The first is that it is dull, dull, dull, in a pretentious, florid and archly fatuous fashion. The second is that it is repulsive."

Prescott seemed as baffled by Humbert Humbert's conniving use of language and lore as he was by his abuse of Lolita and the law. To Nabokov's relief, however, a handful of more astute readers, notably Dorothy Parker and William Styron, wrote rave reviews. And *Lolita* became the first novel since *Gone With the Wind* to sell more than 100,000 copies in a mere twenty-one days. Stanley Kubrick scrambled to acquire the movie rights. And Lolita was off, onto her wayward cinematic adventures.

Fifty years later, Nabokov's novel has sold 50 million copies worldwide. And Vintage Books has already exhausted the 50,000 copies of its fiftieth-anniversary edition, printed this fall. A young woman's pale pink mouth is advertised as the most provocative cover in *Lolita*'s American history, although in comparison with its flamboyant prose it is painfully banal. Clearly, *Lolita* still unhinges and rattles—and that may well be an understatement. To many American readers, *Lolita* is more disturbing than ever. Writing in the *Boston Globe*, for instance, Leland de la Durantaye, a Nabokov scholar at Harvard, dwells on the writer's supposed abhorrence of his protagonist, who acts with "callousness and coldness." Numerous articles, both in the mainstream press and in academic journals, have obsessed over Humbert's pedophilia, taking solace in the morally

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redemptive qualities of Nabokov's art.

But Nabokov had alertly warned: "Lolita has no moral in tow." If anything, *Lolita*'s linguistic trysts and poetical twists mark the genesis of a unique language, peculiar to Vladimir Nabokov, a language perhaps best defined in terms of texture. Nabokov does not merely write, he weaves his words together, revealing intricate and supremely original designs. "What make is the magic carpet?" Humbert asks in a poem he calls his "maniac's masterpiece." In the foreword to the 1966 version of his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov admits that in looking for a title for *Lolita*, he toyed with *The Anthemion*—the name of a honeysuckle ornament made of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters. It would be a precious subtitle for *Lolita*. For what we are left with, in the end, are Humbert's incandescent and treacherous words, which breathe insane life—moralists beware—into one of the few great love stories of twentieth-century literature. "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita." ■

LETTERS
CONTINUED

(Continued From Page 2)

MASTERPIECE OR MESS?

Boston

■ William Deresiewicz's review ["On Everything," Oct. 3] of Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* offers some candid observations about the advancement to fame of "beautiful young women novelists with Commonwealth roots." Apparently we should stop gushing over Smith's "dubious" gifts of beauty and "facility" and realize that her "mind that teems with characters, plots, situations, ideas" does not necessarily produce restrained, formally coherent fiction. Then we could decide whether a novel deserves the judgment of "undoubted masterpiece" (Roy's *God of Small Things*) or "gigantic mess" (Smith's *White Teeth*).

Or, we could resist rendering decisions based upon whether authors deserve their "billing." Instead, we could criticize because we have a kind of disinterested public service to provide—a restrained attentiveness that we rightly feel authors and readers need. Deresiewicz's complaints ironically yield a noticeably unrestrained, and often frankly ranting, review of Smith's "*dommage*" to E.M. Forster's *Howards End*. *On Beauty*'s legacy of a painting—and of "beauty"—rather than a house, emphasizes the ways *Howards End* also addresses the desires for "beauty and adventure" that often spring up in those, like Leonard Bast, whose lives are conspicuously classed as sordid and boring. Forster's troublesome resolution of this difficulty is: "Let Squalor be turned into Tragedy," in that Bast's child will, one hopes, inherit the "beauty and adventure that the world offers."

One could argue that Forster's formal economy is overly tidy here; Leonard Bast's death-by-bookshelf-and-sword is darkly, unfairly, funny—an impatient dismissal of his tiresome, inappropriate insistence on beauty and adventure. I personally prefer Smith's proliferation of Leonards. There's just no killing Leonard Bast in *On Beauty*—another always pops in, eager for opportunity, refreshingly ungrateful and refusing adherence to the expectations of those who intervened on his behalf. Forster's discrete characters get broken down and messily spread out over several of Smith's, who seem like palimpsests of free-floating attributes: Jerome is both Helen Schlegel (early love affair, subsequent belief in things unseen) and Paul Wilcox (absent most of the action); Vee Kipps echoes both Evie Wilcox and, intriguingly, Jacky Bast; art historian Howard Belsey evokes Schlegel culture (theory-driven liberalism), Henry Wilcox (infidelities) and, finally, Leonard Bast—who now gets to close the novel. This is certainly confusing, but it also goes someplace Forster does not: the space between Squalor and Tragedy termed "Involvement," in Smith's *White Teeth*, the "tired, inevitable" realization that we are all simply too connected to deserve comfortably distinct lives. LISA FLUET

FLATTENED BY FLATTERY

Brooklyn, NY

■ I don't expect a critic with no feel for popular culture to appreciate an analysis of its mechanisms—or to recognize a parody of its gestures. But I do expect him to read my book, which Russell Jacoby evidently failed to do when he reviewed *Mediated* ["Game Theory," June 27]. After saying that it "consists of loosely connected vignettes and observations," Jacoby adds, "To the extent he has an argument, his best chapter, on 'The Cult of the Child,' bears little relationship to it, which de Zengotita coolly admits. The sanctification of children seems 'to sit strangely' amid a society of mediation."

Ah, the convenient quote excerpt. What I actually "admitted" (!) was that it "seems to sit strangely alongside all that ironic parenting," the very specific topic of a previous section—and even then the clear emphasis is on "seems," and reconciliation follows.

One of the book's basic arguments, reiterated throughout, involves the "flattery of representation"—meaning the effect media have simply by virtue of addressing us. The book is an account of how that flattery intensifies as media multiply. The introduction focuses on the "God's eye view" contemporary media provide. The concluding chapter (*Jedermensch ein Ubermensch*) ends with a riff on cloning,

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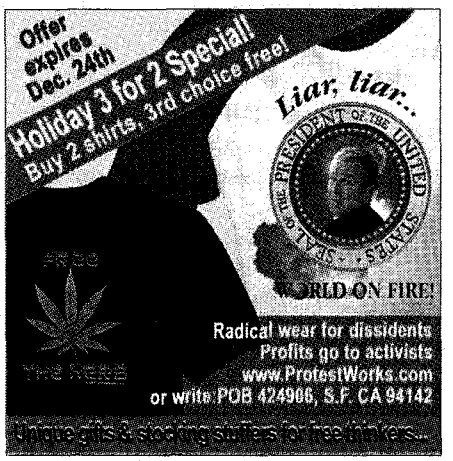
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This fundamental argument, impossible to miss if you read the book, eluded Jacoby. And then he says I don't have one. "Loosely connected vignettes and observations" is right—but that's a description of his review, not my book. THOMAS DE ZENGOTITA

JACOBY REPLIES

Venice, Calif.

■ Thomas de Zengotita's book is a half-written grab bag of half-interesting observations on popular culture; the mantra of "flattery of representation" does not save it. What does the "cult of the child" or Bush's foreign policy have to do with media flattery? De Zengotita gives it a try, but turns flip or trite. He dubs "Justin's Helmet Principle" the belief of anxious parents that their little Justin should sport a gargantuan helmet while tricycling. Why are they so obsessed? Media flattery? Unlikely. Is this the "ironic parenting" that de Zengotita believes dominates society? Doubtful. Unfortunately, he can't figure it out. Why does society sanctify children? "Another ironic doubling is at work, get used to it." The only thing we have to get used to is de Zengotita's general befuddlement. In his riff on the twenty-four-hour Weather Channel ("Hey, if weather is your thing you have such access!"), de Zengotita allows that he keeps it on while he writes. A message from someone who lacks the "feel" for popular culture to Mr. Plugged-In: Consider clicking off the set the next time you write a book. RUSSELL JACOBY

BRRRRR

Peterborough, Ontario

■ In his review of *The Power of Nightmares* ["Beware the Holy War," June 20], Peter Bergen reports that Sayyid Qutb was shocked to hear "a secular love song"—"Baby, It's Cold Outside"—played at a dance in the local church hall. But that doesn't tell the half of it. "Baby, It's Cold Outside" was considered quite risqué when it came out, and radio stations were at first hesitant to play it. Many Americans would have shared Qutb's reaction. MICHAEL NEUMANN

ROSE ANN & GETÚLIO, WE'RE SORRY

■ In Marc Cooper's "Arnold Show: Canceled" [Nov. 28], the name of Rose Ann DeMoro, head of the California Nurses Association, was misspelled. (This in no way reduces the majesty of the nurses' total victory.)

In Hilary Wainright's "Corruption of Hope in Brazil" [Nov. 14], an editing error placed Getúlio Vargas of Brazil in Colombia.

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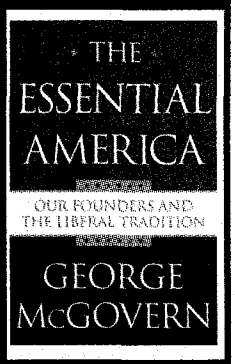

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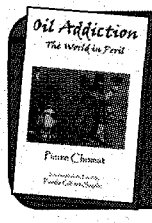

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COMMENT

(Continued From Page 9)

hews to the rules of the female TV narrative. Its hero is a woman struggling to balance the demands of career and family. Her ascendancy is an accident (she takes over after a conservative President has a fatal stroke) and her politics are even more unlikely. She's neither Democrat nor Republican: She's an Independent, hawkish but ethical. That's a combination we've yet to see in the White House. But then, President Allen is a latter-day Athena, except in one respect. There are moments in every episode when her composure cracks, and doubts about her capacity to lead crease her brow. In the end she always gets it together, usually with the help of her husband, who's a good head taller (naturally).

Though politics is the linchpin of this show, at least as much attention is paid to the domestic drama. There's hubby's pain that he can't be baseball commissioner, the teen son's shame that his dad is officially called the First Gentleman, and two daughters' yearning for their mom's undivided attention. These problems wouldn't wrack a real female leader to anywhere near the extent that they burden Mack. But it's her reaction, when official duty beckons, that counts: Watch as her pained expression changes to a presidential impassivity. Despite all the strategies of deflection, this rejection of the maternal imperative is a very potent moment.

Indeed, the President's body language is the real tension in this show. Her lips are lushly lipsticked, but she keeps them closed, signifying the combination of sexuality and power that most female politicians feel compelled to deny. President Allen doesn't girdle her erotic energy; she uses it to heighten her charisma, just as a male leader would. That may not be entirely realistic, but it's credible, thanks to Geena Davis's artful performance. She plays Mack as a woman who can't get over the feeling that she's steering through uncharted waters even as she loves the waves.

There's a link between this character and the one Davis portrayed in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), the formative, if schematic, feminist road movie that made her a star. Thelma is a woman of repressed desire and curiosity, astonished by her self-assertion. When she acts up, her ambivalence explodes in an ungainly cackle. In the course of the film, as she grows willing to accept the violent consequences of claiming her agency, the giggling stops. Back in 1991 murder was a desperate but plausible response to the viciousness of male power, and suicide a heroic alternative to defeat. *Thelma and Louise* was a tragedy; *Commander in Chief* is what *Variety* would call an inspirational. But what was true then still is: Davis's face is a map of women's changing status.

Pop culture often serves as a trial run for social change. It's an arena where new ways can be tried on for size. Still, enjoying a fantasy is not the same thing as acting on it. The success of *Commander in Chief* doesn't necessarily mean that Americans are ready to elect a woman President. But the heat this show generates suggests that men have calmed down enough to contemplate the pleasures of female power. The Republicans may no longer be able to play the male-resentment card, their ace in recent elections. So, be afraid, John Fund. Be very afraid. RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

Richard Goldstein writes on the intersection of pop culture, politics and sexuality.

Emile Capouya

Emile Capouya, who died recently, was literary editor of The Nation *from 1970 to 1976. His successor, Elizabeth Pochoda, recalls, "I always thought he was brilliant and unusually fearless about his opinions. My desk was filled with the most elaborately courteous rejection letters to contributors that managed, despite their politesse, to express ferociously firm opinions about the shortcomings of the work submitted." —The Editors*

Emile (*a k a* Mike) Capouya was before and after his tenure as *Nation* literary editor one of the hard core of young intellectual editors and executives who brought trade book publishing up to European standards during the paperback revolution and lived on to oppose and be ground down by the invasion of the conglomerates.

His two names seemed to stand for the two sides of Capouya's powerful integrity. Mike signified the immigrant American kid in the teenage stevedore and Merchant Marine who carried in his spirit the honed hardihood of the seafarer. Emile signified the European culture that was his birthright and that he cultivated at Columbia and Oxford and ever after: captain of the fencing team; translator of French, Italian, German, Dutch; editor of Ivo Andric, Primo Levi, Ismail Kadare and many other international writers; and the essayist whose prose style descended from that of the *philosophes* in its dignity, élan and thrust.

My favorite essay was "The Red Flag and the Black," a beautifully lucid exposition of anarchism. Anarchism was where Mike and Emile, the ex–working stiff and the European-style intellectual, came together as intense collaborators. For all his dialectical agility and nuance, his black flag flew two simple principles that he had learned with his hands: People long to do better than they do, and they are naturally creative and cooperative. The categorical imperative of his politics was to act always in the spirit of the society we wish to bring about.

As an editor he followed the general counsel of the serious and the innovative: that a job was worth having as long as you were able to do your thing. He worked at many publishing houses and even headed a couple of them until the string of his independence again ran out. Unlike most of his peers, he wasn't reverent about the modern tradition and regarded most contemporary authors of talent as "peacocks or clowns." He reserved his notion of greatness for the moral visionaries, those with the prophetic instinct, such as Silone and Solzhenitsyn, who regarded themselves, in the latter's words, as a second government.

Capouya's own moral vision eventually found its form in a panoply of stories and reflections from his life. *In the Sparrow Hills* is a unique work, written as boldly and subtly as memoir prose gets. The winner of the prestigious Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy, it reminds me on every page of the words of Danton to his executioner that Emile Mike Capouya liked to quote: "Show them my head. It's worth looking at."

TED SOLOTAROFF

Ted Solotaroff is writing a memoir of his life as a literary editor and critic.

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NATIONAL

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NEW YORK

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■The Partisan Defense Committee's twentieth annual Holiday Appeal benefit for class-war prisoners, featuring live jazz with Bern Nix/Francois Grillot, Prajna and Madsól. Free Mumia Abu-Jamal! Speakers include Lynne Stewart, Barry Bachrach (attorney for Leonard Peltier), Rachel Wolkenstein (PDC Counsel, former attorney for Mumia). Friday, December 9, 6 to 11 PM. 6 Harrison St., Manhattan. For more information, call (212) 406-4252.

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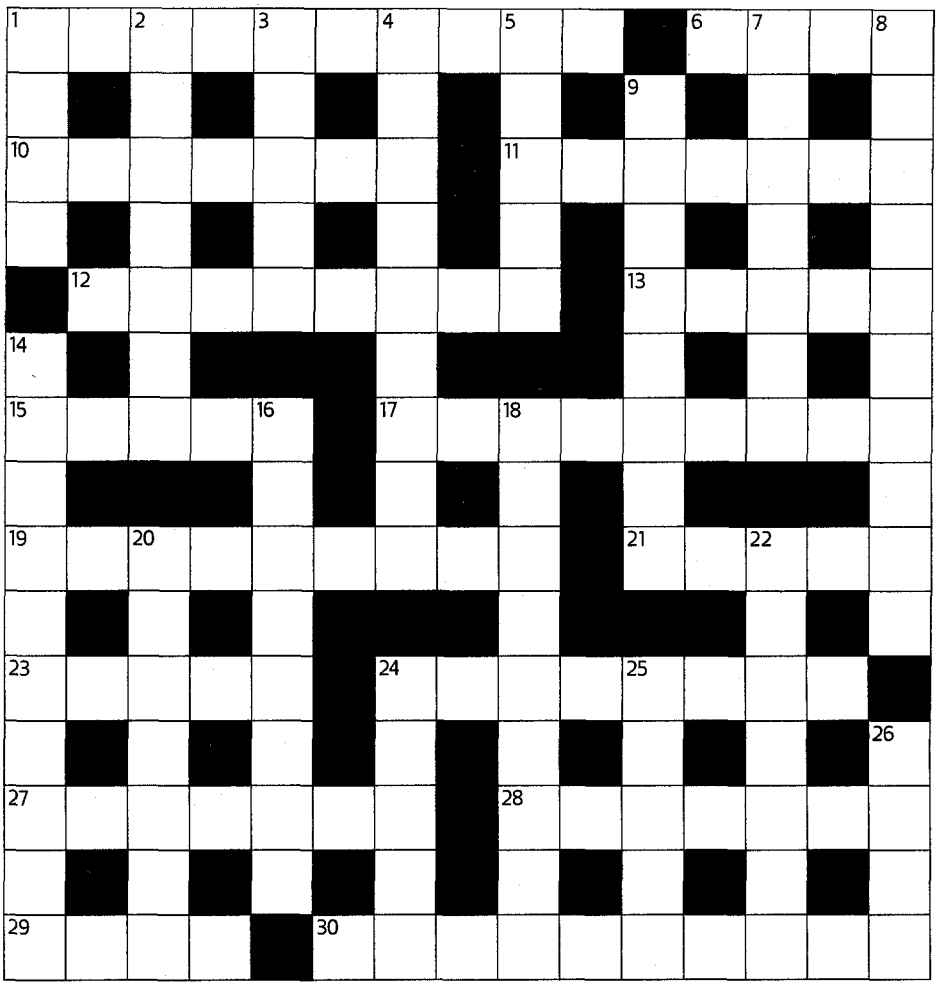


ACROSS

1 Very precise in a clarinet, for example, which is kept from doing anything. (10)

6 A region—like "first class, but backward!" (4)

10 One or another is the opposite, but it puts a sort of rein around a common article. (7)

11 There's a hole in the wrecked car, which might prove deadly. (7)

12 What many had to pass by in World War II sounds like what one in the attacking plane had to peer at. (4-4)

13 One might tend to be like Unser in a wreck. (5)

15 Doesn't like to be in haste, possibly. (5)

17 What the stretcher might do to a tale is more like what the needle might do. (9)

19 It might eventually make your chest possibly react red, to a point. (5,4)

21 A sugar concoction for one classically on guard? (5)

23 Let nothing in a badly built wall display it. (5)

24 Spring up too much? A lot of bushes and trees might do it. (8)

27 Perhaps a tumbler caused my angst when it was shattered. (7)

29 and **28** What tar was supposed to do at times, on order. (4,3,4)

30 Brought up, when called inside, and put in different shape. (10)

DOWN

1 and **14** What some Britishers do in the tower is what one might do on a cash register, with some direction. (4,3,7)

2 Shape up, as an alternative to tar? (4,3)

3 One will do it to restore things, shortly, when the lady comes up objectively, to a degree. (5)

4 Somewhat like an old rifleman, with the auto parked on the frothy stuff around in here. (9)

5 One might introduce the speaker, since these are his initials, one hears. (5)

7 Is the lady a Communist, or like a lamb after a good going-over? (7)

8 Pro-fashion? No, the morning has a true sort with his letters mixed up. (10)

9 See 24

14 See 1

16 Dorothy's friend who dreaded the thought of any light application—useful as a sham adversary. (5,3)

18 Reputedly a busy type has an extraordinary act that the Queen puts a finish to, with one who is supposed to guard her. (9)

20 See 24

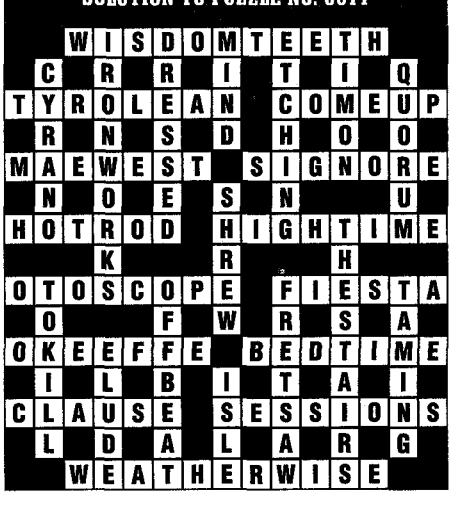
22 Term of affection for a "stout fellow"—much better than one the curate was faced with at breakfast. (4,3)

24, 9 and **20** In such a position you would have to be concerned with a couple of points—evidently sharp points. (2,3,5,2,1,7)

25 Seemingly great actress, but she didn't like company. (5)

26 You can't say the kids won't get confused by it, but it might cause trouble on the road. (4)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3011



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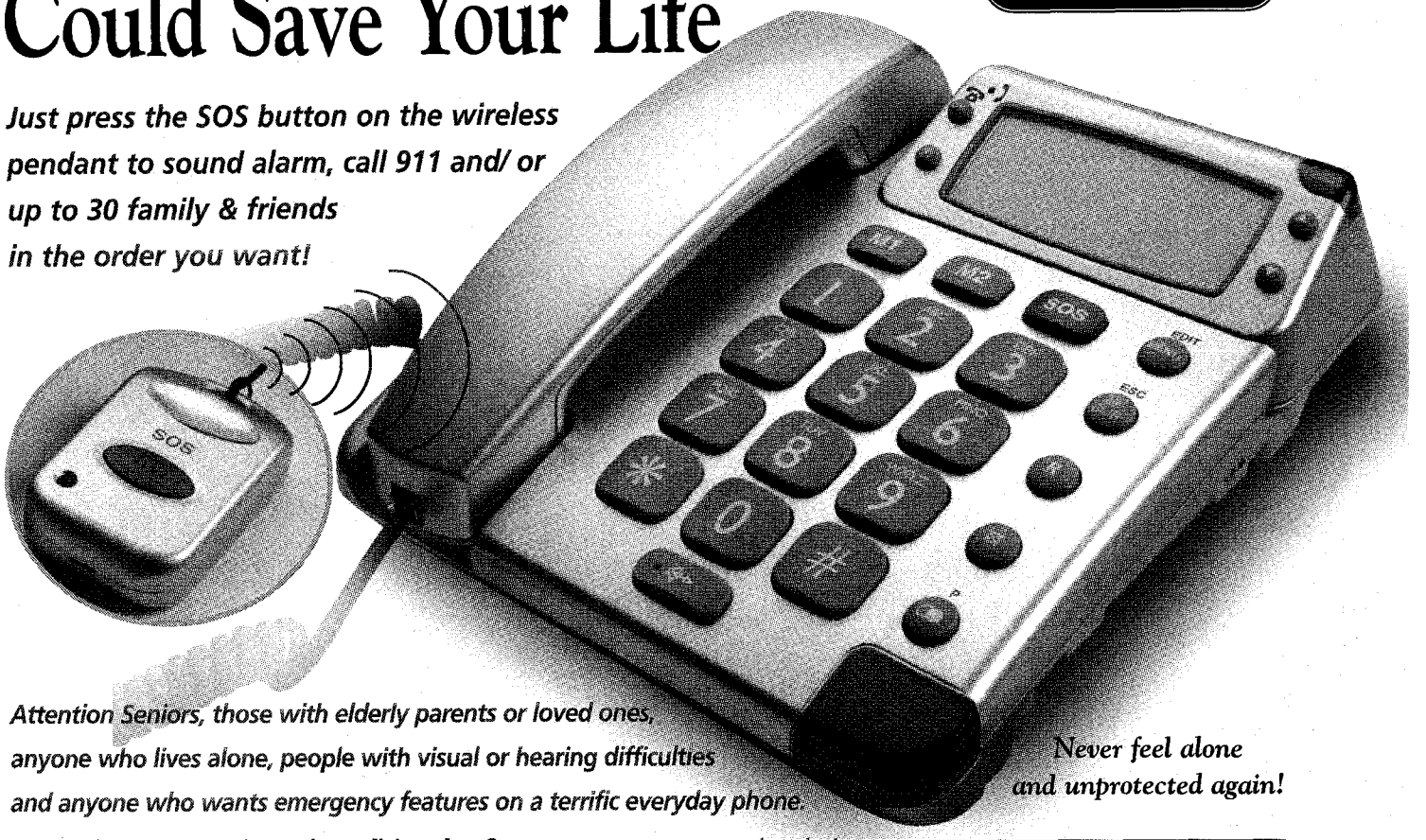

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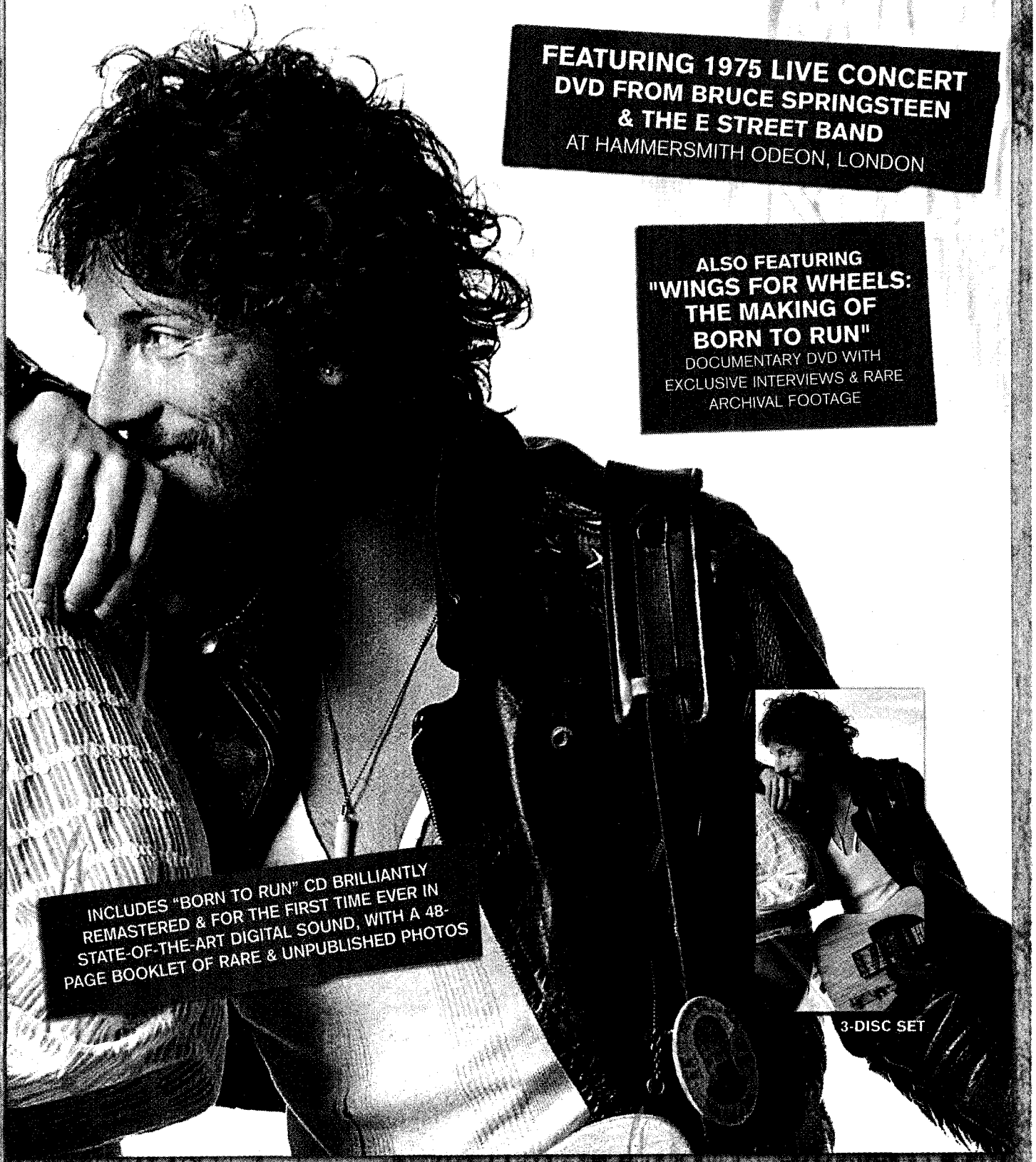

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